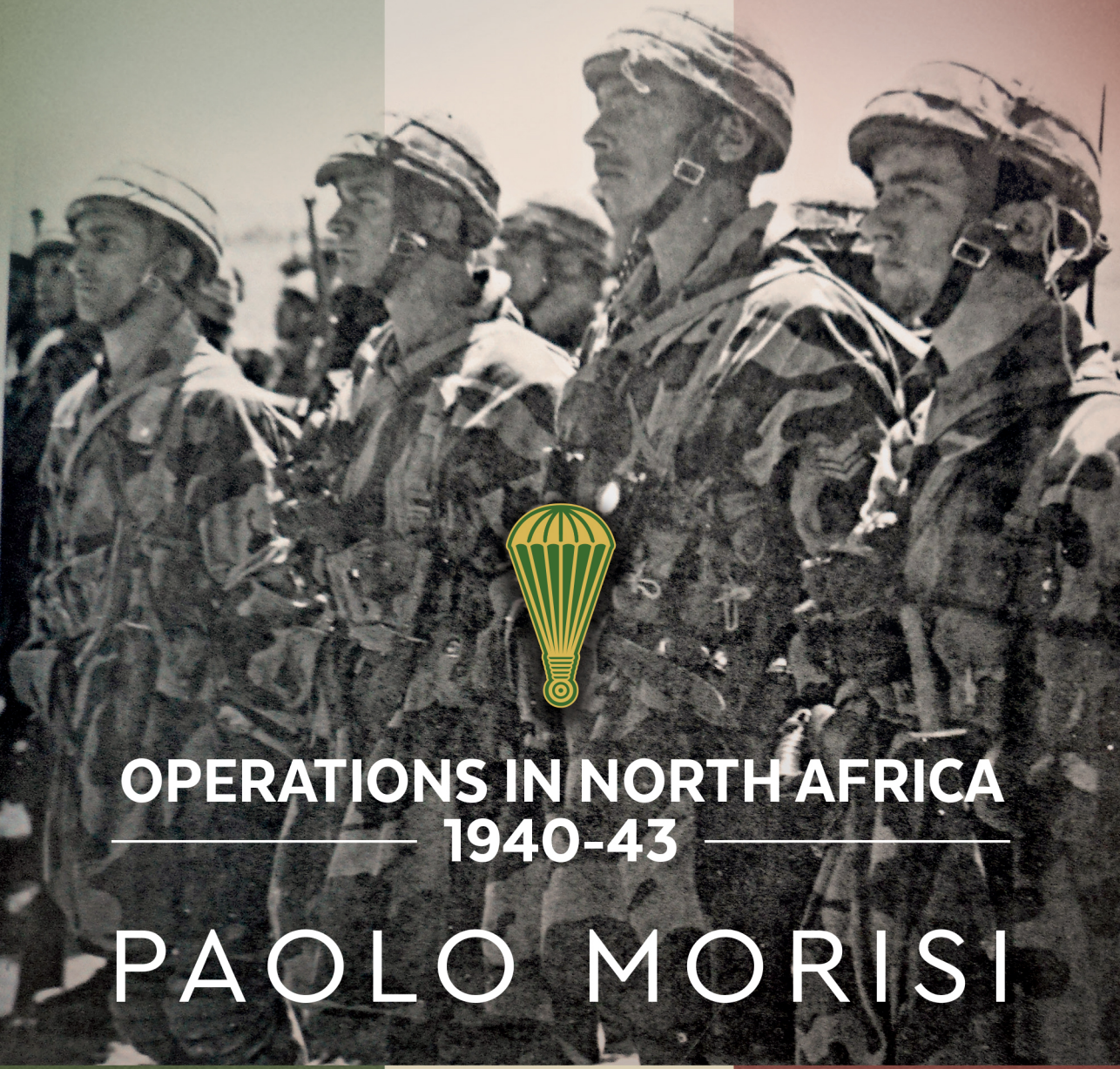
THE ITALIAN FOLGORE PARACHUTE DIVISION



OPERATIONS IN NORTH AFRICA 1940-43

PAOLO MORISI

The North African campaign was one of the hardest-fought episodes of World War Two, yet the vital part played by the Italian Army – and in particular, its *Folgore* Parachute Division on behalf of the Axis Alliance – is frequently overlooked.

Initially created to emulate the German *Fallschirmjäger* (in order to carry out the planned airborne attack against the British base of Malta), *Folgore* Airborne Division fought on the battlefields of North Africa – including the key Battle of El Alamein. This elite unit distinguished itself at El Alamein, despite inadequate equipment and weapons, while facing unfavorable odds.

This book describes a paratroop unit that earned the respect of its Allied opponents during some of the hardest-fought engagements of North Africa. The key theme of the book is the paratroopers' involvement in the Axis war effort, through an analysis of their training, weaponry and battle tactics; another key focus is an assessment of the *Folgore's* specific role during the major battles of the North African campaign. It covers in detail, for example, the *Folgore's* first fierce military engagement against British and New Zealand troops during the Battle of Alam El Halfa in September 1942. It then details a number of smaller actions that preceded the Battle of El Alamein, such as the counter-attack during the British Operation 'Beresford', which led to the capture of Brigadier General G.H. Clifton – commander of the New Zealand 6th Brigade – by a patrol of *Folgore* soldiers.

The focus then shifts upon the *Folgore's* major engagement of the campaign during the Battle of El Alamein: Operation 'Lightfoot', which was launched by General Montgomery on 24 October 1942: it was designed to break through the Italian-held southern sector of the El Alamein line, where the *Bologna*, *Brescia*, *Pavia* and *Folgore* Divisions anchored the Axis right flank. While describing key events during this operation, the book also highlights how the *Folgore* used unusual tactics to repulse the massive enemy-armored attack: this included letting the enemy advance into a '*cul-de-sac*' and then launching a counter-attack against its armored vehicles and infantry units from all sides, and also by a combination of fire from 47mm anti-tank guns, mortars, hand grenades and other incendiary devices.

This book describes the desperate retreat in the desert of the Italian units as a result of the collapse of Axis military defenses in November 1942; finally, it highlights the role of the paratroopers during the last battles in Tunisia – especially those in defense of the Mareth line and Takrouna in the spring of 1943.

Illustrated with rare archival photographs and detailed maps, this volume offers a fascinating insight into a little-studied aspect of Axis forces. The volume draws heavily upon both Axis and Allied (Britain and New Zealand) archival sources, such as the war diaries and the post-battle reports of the military units engaged in North Africa; it thus sheds new light on one of the most important campaigns of World War Two. By drawing from archival sources from both sides, it also furnishes a more complete and balanced perspective on a critical juncture in the war, such as the Battle of El Alamein.

Since the early 1990s, Paolo Morisi has dedicated himself to academic and military studies research, and has published books, articles and book reviews on European and military history.

He has published several articles and reviews in peer-reviewed academic journals such as *Modern Italy*, *Political Studies Review*, *Michigan War Studies Review*, *Telos* and the *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*. He has also received an award for his latest book publication, which traces the history of Italian crack mountain stormtroopers of World War One: *Fiamme Verdi* (Bassano del Grappa, Itinera Progetti Editore, 2012).

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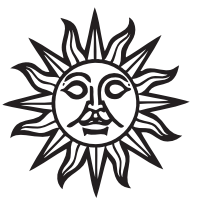
Operations in North Africa 1940-43

Paolo Morisi



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Introduction

The aim of this book is to analyze the role of Italian troops during the North African campaign between 1940-43, with specific reference to the paratroopers of the '*Folgore*' ('Lightning') Division. The unit's combat history will be examined within the context of the battle tactics of the Axis forces, with specific focus on the capabilities of the so-called 'Special Forces'. 'Special Forces' are here defined as military units that stand apart from the common infantry (given their better training, their more rigorous selection process and their special combat deployment).

The Italian military first developed Special Forces during World War One, with the *reparti d'assalto* (the so-called '*arditi* assault units') in 1917 on the Isonzo Front. Their role was similar to the one of the German stormtroopers, which utilized infiltration tactics to penetrate enemy positions and break the impasse of trench warfare. The *reparti d'assalto* relied primarily upon the elements of speed and surprise to attack enemy positions; they utilized their physical strength and prowess, and worked in close collaboration with the artillery to overwhelm the enemy. Their attacks usually began with a very intense, but brief, artillery barrage, which forced enemy troops to hide in their dugouts. They then began running toward the enemy line – throwing hundreds of smoke bombs and hand grenades to confuse the enemy into thinking that the artillery barrage was still taking place. As these units reached their rivals positions, they would begin the assault – using hand grenades, machine guns and knives. The *arditi's* speed and firepower typically enabled them to overcome enemy resistance and, in several instances, their deployment resulted in broad infantry advances.

What set these Special Forces apart from ordinary infantry divisions of the Italian Army was the focus upon extensive training: the *reparti d'assalto* not only had special recruitment practices, but also received specific training both military and physical.[1] In essence, the *arditi's* focus on repeating the same drills day after day gave them the physical and mental preparation to achieve a degree of 'immunity to danger'.[2]

The first chapter, in particular, will reveal the many similarities between the *arditi* assault units of World War One and the paratroopers of World War Two; both consisted of carefully selected volunteers that undertook a rigorous training program prior to their deployment in the battlefield.

After the First World War, the Italian Government disbanded the *reparti d'assalto*, which by 1919, had taken a central role in the military occupation of Fiume, led by the war hero and poet Garbriele D'Annunzio. By then, they had become politicized and, as a result, the government and the military hierarchy quickly did away with these units.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the military failed to constitute and train Special Forces – and when World War Two began, Italy's military was largely lagging behind other European armies, which could rely upon pre-existing, well trained, elite formations. The Germans, for example, deployed from the onset of the war specialized paratrooper units, which were an integral piece of the *blitzkrieg* tactical operations, while the Soviet Army utilized special 'tank-hunter' units to oppose the German offensive during Operation 'Barbarossa'. It was only after the first major defeats in Italy's main theater of war, North Africa, that the military hierarchy began to make significant reforms: some Special Forces were newly created and some of the armored divisions

1 Giorgio Rochat, *Gli arditi della grande guerra: Origini, battaglie e miti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981).
2 Angelo Pirocchi, *Italian Arditi: Elite Assault Troops, 1917-20* (Botley, Osprey, 2004), p.24.

received better training and equipment, which combined with the early battle experiences, significantly improved their offensive capabilities. The Italian paratroopers were newly created following half-hearted pre-war attempts to create a parachuting school; in addition, a key influence was also the German *Fallschirmjäger* units, which had completed their initial airborne operations in the spring of 1940.

The primary role of the Italian paratroopers was to take part in airborne assaults by jumping by parachute to occupy important tactical positions (such as a key fortification, an airfield, or a bridge) and hold it as part of the vanguard of a more substantial infantry attack. By attacking from the rear through a surprise assault from the sky, the paratroopers could prove decisive in destabilizing the enemy's defensive infrastructure.

According to German tactical doctrine, the element of surprise was the most important feature in the success of airborne operations: even a relatively small group of paratroopers (such as a battalion of well trained, fit soldiers, with the proper heavy weaponry and led by courageous leaders) could prove decisive in occupying and holding a key enemy position. It was thought that an airborne attack in the rear of the enemy's defenses would likely unsettle any opponent and inhibit the organization of proper defenses; this type of surprise attack could then facilitate a broad infantry advance and result in the occupation of key enemy positions. Other key aspects of the German *Fallschirmjäger*, which influenced the development of Italian airborne troops, was the importance placed on training and planning, and some of the specific combat tactics (for example, the focus on defending newly-taken positions by way of a counter-attack).[3]

In 1940, the Italian leader Benito Mussolini had initiated the so-called 'parallel war' primarily against France and Britain. This was to be a conflict that Italy would fight in co-operation with its German ally, but in the Mediterranean theater, Italy would fight independently and for Italian interests; however, by 1941 (in North Africa, in particular), the Italian war effort had faltered and had exposed Italy's overall lack of military preparedness for the war. By the time the *Folgore* was dispatched to North Africa in July 1942, the confrontation between the Axis forces and Britain and its Commonwealth allies had been raging for two years, and the campaign had witnessed several major battles. The conflict had progressed not only in relation to the initial British advance against the Italians – led by General Archibald Wavell and his Western Desert Force – but had also subsequently saw the Axis forces take the initiative under the energetic leadership of General Erwin Rommel. The campaign had also been impacted by the strategic priorities of the political leaders – especially by Adolf Hitler's desire to prop up his Italian ally in the North African theater of operations. In fact, without German intervention in North Africa in early 1941, Italian troops might have collapsed – leading to the loss of all Italian-controlled territories on the continent.

Since 1940, the desert war had favored modern armies that had invested heavily in technological development; in fact, technological development proved to be the major success factor of desert warfare. A high degree of mobility was key in ground operations, and those armies supplied with adequate and powerful armored vehicles and tanks were enabled to wage a more effective war: armored maneuvers in the desert depended upon such factors as seizing the initiative and operational agility through depth and synchronization. The Germans' armored warfare successes against the British, for example, were due in large part 'to their ability to synchronize their operating systems'.[4] Another key factor of early German success proved to be the close co-ordination between infantry, mobile units and artillery 'due to the fluid nature of desert operations and the possibilities for excellent enemy observation, close and continuous field-artillery support for all

3 Bruce Quarrie, *German Airborne Divisions: Mediterranean Theatre 1942–45* (Botley: Osprey, 2004).
4 Department of the Army, *Field Manual: Desert Operations* (Washington: U.S. Army, 1993), p.90.

levels of the force'.[5] Field artillery units had to be mobile and their crews able to use effectively new types of heavy gun mounted vehicles – and the desert war had also quickly exposed the weaknesses of those armies (such as the Italian) that had a relatively small and largely obsolete mechanized force, and that relied primarily on World War One tactics based upon static infantry defenses. Another key aspect of the campaign had been the availability of effective anti-tank guns to allow infantry units to properly confront enemy-armored attacks; the Italian Army also lagged behind other armies in the development of effective anti-tank weapons.

The North African conflict had been initiated with Italy's entry into the war in June 1940: Italy aimed at controlling the Mediterranean – and in September 1940, it began an offensive against the British by invading Egypt. Italian forces based in Libya had been mobilized for the campaign, which aimed to wrest from Britain the strategic control of the Suez Canal and the Persian oilfields. Soon, the technological and tactical gulf between the ill-equipped and badly-led Italians and the British became very evident, as a small, but much more mechanized, British force was able to overwhelm the Italians. This factor was also recognized by Rommel once he landed in North Africa: 'Although the British Army was far smaller in numbers than the Italian it was better equipped, had a better and more modern Air Force, most important, it's striking columns were fully motorized'.[6] As a result of Italy's defeat at the hand of the British Eighth Army, Hitler decided to send to North Africa a small German armored contingent – the *Afrika Korps* – to help its ally in the spring of 1941.

Upon landing in North Africa, General Rommel wasted no time and quickly led the Axis forces in a major counter-attack, which pushed back the British Army; in mid-1942, an Axis offensive saw Rommel inflict a severe defeat on the British at Gazala, and also capture the port of Tobruk.

By June 1942, the Axis forces were within 60 miles of the British base of Alexandria in Egypt and were on the verge of destroying the British Eighth Army. It was in this context of a continued Axis offensive that both Hitler and Mussolini eventually decided to cancel the airborne and landing operation against the British-controlled island of Malta. As a result of the cancellation of the invasion of Malta, Axis paratrooper units (the *Folgore* Division and the German *Ramcke* Brigade) which originally had been destined to lead the Malta operation were dispatched to the North African theater as light infantry units. Initially, these forces were to be dropped in the British rear to take control of the Suez Canal as part of an Axis major offensive, but subsequently, as the Axis was bogged down at El Alamein, they were ordered to occupy defensive positions.

There is a tendency by military historians of the desert war to downplay the role of the Italian military following Rommel's arrival in Africa: in many studies, Axis military success in North Africa is largely attributed to Rommel's mastery of the battlefield and tactical brilliance – and often these studies are based on an uncritical reading of Rommel's war diaries.[7] Moreover, many historians also point to the advanced mechanized equipment of the *Afrika Korps* as another major source of Rommel's early successes.[8] As Walker asserts: '… in the historiography of World War Two generally the Italians are undoubtedly poor relations, especially in English works….' Moreover, he argues that '… there are, quite naturally, many works in English that deal with every aspect of the British and Commonwealth contributions to the campaign. Perhaps more surprisingly, there are

5 *Field Manual: Desert Operations*, p.91.
6 Basil H. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953), p.92.
7 Desmond Young, *Rommel, The Desert Fox* (London: Harper, 1951); Samuel W. Mitcham Jr., *Rommel's Desert War: The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1988).
8 Ronald Lewin, *The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 1977).

almost as many that concentrate on the German forces involved. But in all these works the Italians remain a shadowy presence, although almost always acknowledged…'[9]

Nevertheless, the Italians made up the bulk of the Axis infantry troops during the North African campaign – and the desert war was, primarily, Italy's war for control of the Mediterranean against the British Empire. As Baxter asserts: '… the story of Italy's war in North Africa is slowly emerging out of the shadow cast by Rommel and the Afrika Korps…'[10] Most recently, military historians such as Paddy Griffiths and Ian Walker have begun to re-evaluate the role played by the Italian military in the desert war: Griffiths has argued that an Italian military renaissance took place after the Battle of Beda Fomm in February 1941; after this defeat, Italy not only improved the combat effectiveness of its infantry by dispatching to North Africa better equipped and reinforced infantry divisions, but also introduced its elite mechanized forces, such as the *Ariete*, which fought well during 1942.[11] Similarly, Walker has argued that Italy's elite armored divisions did contribute heavily to the Axis successes after Rommel's arrival in Africa – and especially in the important Battle of Gazala.[12]

Frank Joseph's *Mussolini's War* offers perhaps the most comprehensive reassessment of Italy's World War Two efforts; Joseph argues that:

> Mussolini's war belongs to these multiplying reassessments, but differs from them in that it does not focus on a single campaign or theater, but for the first time attempts to encompass the entire conflict from the perspective of Italy's true role in the fighting. In so doing, its fresh examination of the Italian military in North Africa, on the Eastern front, in the air and at sea, reveals a story radically at odds from standard assumptions about the Duce and his men, unknown to most readers, particularly outside Italy.[13]

With regards to the desert war, Joseph demonstrates that by 1942, the Italian Navy (*Regia Marina*) was fighting on par with the British Royal Navy in the central Mediterranean, while the Italian infantry and armored units had played a key role in Rommel's offensive operations.

The purpose of this book is to continue the reassessment of the Italian military effort during World War Two by focusing upon the role of the Special Forces – the paratroopers – during the North African campaign. To date, this topic of research has been given limited attention; for example, there is only one work in the English language – Paolo Caccia Dominioni's *El Alamein: An Italian Story* – which provides an historical account of the *Folgore's* North African campaign.[14] In addition, there are a number of works published in Italy which mainly deal with the historical recollections of members of the *Folgore* Divison during the North African campaign. To date,

9 Ian Walker, *Iron Hulls Iron Hearts: Mussolini's Elite Armored Divisions in North Africa* (Ramsbury: Crowood Press, 2006), p.6.

10 Colin Baxter, *The War in North Africa, 1940-1943: A Selected Bibliography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), p.36.

11 Paddy Griffiths, *World War II Desert War Tactics* (Botley: Osprey, 2002).

12 Ian Walker, *Iron Hulls.*

13 Frank Joseph, *Mussolini's War: Fascist Italy's Military Struggles from Africa and Western Europe to the Mediterranean and Soviet Union 1935-45* (Solihull: Helion & Company Limited, 2010), p.8. Other well-researched works on Italy's North African campaign include: Chris Dunning, *Courage Alone: The Italian Air Force 1940-1943* (London: Hikoki Publications, 2009); Hkan Gustavsson and Ludovico Slongo, *Gladiator vs CR.42 Falco: 1940-41* (Botley: Osprey, 2012); Donald Nijboer, *Spitfire V vs C.202 Folgore: Malta 1942* (Botley: Osprey, 2014); Mark Stille, *Italian Battleships of World War II* (Botley: Osprey, 2011); Jack Greene and Alessandro Massignani, *The Naval War in the Mediterranean 1940-1943* (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998).

14 Paolo Caccia Dominioni, *El Alamein 1933-1962: An Italian Story* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966).

Parachute unit training in Tarquinia, spring 1942.
(Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Mussolini tours Tarquinia Airfield. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

there is no work that provides an historical reconstruction of the *Folgore* Division's operations and that is based on primary sources – thus the aim of this work is to fill such vacuum and place the operations of the paras within the context of the wider confrontation between the Axis and the Allies.

In the following chapters, I will briefly review the establishment, training and tactics of the paratroopers: Chapter 2 will review events surrounding the planned operation against Malta's British garrison, in which the Italian paratroopers were supposed to take a leading role, and I will then move on to the main purpose of my research, which is an assessment of the *Folgore's* combat operations in North Africa between 1942-43; the final chapter will provide an overall assessment of the *Folgore*.

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MANCO' LA FORTUNA NON IL VALORE, 1 July 1942.[1]

1 Motto of Italian troops in North Africa.

1

Recruitment and Training

Introduction

Training was one of the main weaknesses of the Italian infantry during World War Two. For the standard infantry soldier, training was generally brief and centered upon basic drills such as marching and shooting with a rifle. Additional factors – such as the scarcity of ammunition for live-fire practice and the ill-preparedness of NCOs/officers for modern mechanized warfare – also contributed to the lack of efficiency of the Italian soldier during the early stages of the war.[1]

The first cause of the poor training and inferior weaponry of the Italian soldiers was Italy's overall economic standing prior to the war. In the 1930s, Italy had made some advances in new technologies and manufacturing, but its economy was still largely based on agriculture – and more than 40 percent of its workforce was still employed in cultivating the land. During the 1930s, Italy's industrial output lagged behind Germany, France and Great Britain, and its expenditure on military weapons and equipment was also vastly inferior; for example, during those years, Italy's annual average steel production was 2.4 million tons, while Britain produced 13.4 million tons and Germany 22.5 million. Its limited industrial base – and its lack of raw materials and energy supply – limited Italy's potential as a military power from the onset of the war. In fact, during the war years, the Allies outpaced the Axis in almost all military production categories – and hence, Italy was never in a position to catch up and bridge the gap with its rivals. This vast disparity in economic power between Italy and Europe's great powers resulted in a poorly mechanized and mobile army which was vastly inferior to the British, German or the American military.

A second factor limiting Italy's military development was that its senior military officer class lacked innovation. In the 1930s for instance, the Italian military hierarchy failed, in large part, to understand the massive changes in military tactics that had taken place after World War One. During the 1920s and 1930s – mainly under the impulse of the writings of such personalities as General Charles De Gaulle, Heinz Guderian, Basil Liddell Hart and others, who wrote important contributions on mechanized tank warfare – one of the most controversial military debates centered on the primacy of mobile vehicles in warfare (and especially what role would the tank play in future conflicts). This debate pitted traditionalists versus innovators: the former argued for the integration of motor vehicles and tanks within infantry units and advocated for no major change to military tactics, while the latter argued for major organizational and tactical changes. They rejected the large, infantry-based armies of World War One and favored smaller, but better trained and equipped (with tanks, trucks and armored vehicles) armies. This last group also staunchly believed that the military ought to separate the armored units from infantry and that the tanks (given their greater firepower and mobility) would dominate future military engagements.

Some aspects of mobile armored warfare, for example, had been effectively incorporated in Italy in the 1930s – but nonetheless, its military entered World War Two with infantry divisions which

1 Brian R. Sullivan, 'The Italian Soldier in Combat, June 1940-September 1943: Myths, Realities and Explanations' in Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill, The Soldier's Experience of War in the West* (London: Pimlico/Random House, 1997), p.180.

still primarily moved on foot. By early 1940, Italy possessed only seven mechanized divisions, but it had 53 non-motorized infantry divisions – thus, it had a vast army, but with few modern weaponry and equipment. By the second year of the war, for example, Italy was able to produce a mere 667 tanks, which compared very poorly to the United States and Britain, which manufactured 14,000 and 8,600 tanks respectively.[2] The Italian military hierarchy's short-sightedness with regards to armored warfare can also be witnessed by the fact that Italy entered the war with inferior anti-tank gun weapons. The self-propelled *Semovente* 75mm anti-tank gun, for example, which could be deployed effectively against British and American tanks, was only introduced in relatively small numbers in the North African campaign. For the Italians, the 47/32mm was the standard anti-tank gun of the campaign. Its firepower was comparable to the British 2 pdr and, as the war evolved and Allied tanks became bigger and more durable, the 47/32mm gun became much less effective, if not altogether obsolete. By 1943, standards (for instance, the weapon) had become a relic of the past.

The lack of effective training and equipment was evidenced on the battlefield, where the Italian Army suffered huge reversals in France, North Africa and in the Balkans during the first years of the war; for example, in June 1940, Italian units fought against a much debilitated French Army on the verge of collapsing to the Germans. The Italian Government had mobilized the army against France to obtain a share of the spoils following Germany's *blitzkrieg* victories in Northern France, but the consequent Italian advance in the Alps was halted by well-fortified French mountain troops, which trounced upon their opponents with an effective artillery and mortar barrage. Pinned down by French fire, the Italian units were unable to overcome the French fortified positions. On that occasion, not only did the Italian infantry perform badly, but also the artillery was not able to deploy its guns in support of offensive operations due to the difficulties it encountered in negotiating the mountainous terrain.[3]

While in Libya/Egypt, the Italian Army faced enemy units that were fully mechanized and that, in general, possessed superior weapons; in Greece, it was stalemated by an army that was not superior in terms of weapons, equipment and heavy armor. Although the weather played a part in halting the advance of the Italians, the Greek forces – defending from high-altitude gun emplacements – were able to stymie Italian offensives. As a result of the lack of positive results during the first year of the war, General Mario Roatta was put in charge of a task force to improve the combat readiness of Italian troops. Roatta's final report, which included a review of the major operations during the first year of the war, was very critical and stated the obvious, which was that both officers and soldiers lacked proper training.[4]

The report pointed out that officers had shown limited capacity for leadership; had limited knowledge of mechanical weapons and mechanized warfare in general; and, most importantly, had limited knowledge of how to properly maneuver large infantry units. The NCOs were also criticized for their absence of initiative and their overall lack of preparation. Infantrymen also lacked initiative and, for the most part, did not know how to operate their individual weapons effectively, nor did they know how to properly operate crew-served weapons such as anti-tank guns, machine guns and mortars.

Roatta's report also discussed specific issues that had hampered the effectiveness of the troops in their respective theaters of operations. With regards to North Africa, Roatta underlined four

2 John Sweet, *Iron Arm: The Mechanization of Mussolini's Army, 1920-40* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2007).

3 Emanuele Sica, 'June 1940: the Italian Army and the Battle of the Alps' – *Canadian Journal of History*, 47:2, 2012, pp.355-378.

4 United States National Archives, NARS T-821/130/000870-72: 'Enemy Captured Records Annex 2 to Roatta circular 4100', 15 March 1941.

main problems: first, infantry had been tactically deployed by General Rodolfo Graziani in static defensive positions that had been often outflanked and overrun by British armored vehicles. A defense in depth approach, with multiple, non-communicating (but mutually supportive) firing points, offered better protection from enemy armor. These firing points should also to be reinforced with both small and medium-sized anti-tank weapons and various anti-tank obstacles. Second, infantry units lacked the ability and the means to conduct rapid field surveys and patrols to properly reconnaissance the desert landscape. This lack of mobility – and the absence of rapid patrol units – had allowed British tank formations to surprise and overwhelm Italian defensive posts. According to Roatta, small motorized patrol units had to be established. The ratio of motor vehicles to men within infantry units had to be improved by supplying the army with armored cars to locate and survey the activities of enemy units. Motor vehicles were also needed for troop transport and for the quick deployment of reserve units to shore up isolated or under-siege defensive positions. Third, the troops had also shown inexperience in operating anti-tank guns – and some infantry units, when faced by enemy armor, had shown 'extreme emotional reactions, to threats, real or assumed'. To improve the effectiveness of infantry units, the report recommended the establishment of Libyan training centers dedicated to anti-tank warfare. These training centers would have a dual purpose: first, to train artillery units on the proper anti-tank tactics, such as how to camouflage their weapons within well dug-in positions and how to get the most out of their weapons by employing them in close combat with the enemy; second, to train dedicated anti-tank infantry units on the proper use of grenades and other makeshift devices, such as Molotov cocktails. These units – working in close collaboration with anti-tank gun and artillery units – would provide a more robust anti-tank defense screen. Fourth, the different branches of the military had been unable to co-operate effectively and had shown an overall lack of co-ordination during major battles. Roatta pointed out that in order to successfully counteract British armored assaults, infantry units needed the support of mobile artillery units and timely bombing raids by the air force. The report urged the branches of the military to work together more closely during both defensive and offensive operations. Air force reconnaissance, in particular, had to play a much bigger role in assisting infantry units while fighting British armor.

Upon landing in North Africa in early 1941, Erwin Rommel made similar observations on the Italian military by pointing out that: '… Their infantry were practically without anti-tank weapons and their artillery completely obsolete. Their training was also a long way short of modern standards…'[5]

Having received poor training prior to the start of the war, the Italian infantry units were deployed in North Africa with limited combat experience, as Walker asserts:

> There was very little line firing practice, which meant that many men fired their weapons for the first time in actual combat. There were also few divisional or larger units' exercises, with the exception of some of the annual maneuvers, which meant that many officers, NCOs and men lacked experience relevant to battlefield conditions. Thus the bulk of the Italian troops that fought in World War Two received much of the training at the front.[6]

Especially in North Africa, where infantry fought against tanks and armored vehicles, Italian soldiers had to learn the techniques of a new and unexpected type of warfare – centered upon medium and heavy armor on the battlefield – while facing the British Eighth Army. The

5 Basil H. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953), p.134.

6 Ian Walker, *Iron Hulls, Iron Hearts: Mussolini's Elite Armored Divisions in North Africa* (Ramsbury: The Crowood Press, 2006), p.23.

commander-in-chief Middle East General Archibald Wavell, for example – in 1940 – could only count upon 36,000 infantry soldiers under his command in North Africa, but his army was highly mobile and its various branches had achieved a higher degree of co-operation between infantry, amour and artillery. This army was not only able to stop a much larger Italian Army advance at Mersa Matruh, but it was also able to initiate a major counter-attack, which succeeded in pushing the Italians back nearly 500 miles. In January 1941, Tobruk was also captured from the Italians. It was the collapse of Italian troops in North Africa, along with their lack of mechanized forces, that prompted Hitler to send a small German mobile force to help its Axis ally.

The paratroopers: origins

In contrast to the ill-preparedness of the infantry divisions, Italian parachute units underwent a more rigorous and comprehensive training program. Drills lasted many more months, while the training staff relied heavily on the lessons learned of 1940 airborne operations by the German paratroopers: the *Fallschirmjäger*. Training was conducted by Italian officers, but there was also close collaboration with German paratrooper officers and units – especially during 1942.

The Tarquinia Parachute School, on the outskirts of Rome, had been founded in 1939 by Colonel Giuseppe Baudoin – a veteran of World War One and a pilot of the *Regia Aeronautica*. The commanders and a vast amount of the training staff of the Tarquinia School came primarily from professional, military backgrounds, with the majority being career officers. The absence of political appointees allowed the parachute school to develop a degree of military professionalism that was uncommon within the broader Italian Army and, especially, the Fascist Militia.

Some military historians have incorrectly argued that German military officers trained the Italian paratroopers.[7] There is no doubt that German airborne operations in the spring of 1940 – and especially the ease with which they overcame, what at the time, were considered to be some of the best-equipped defensive fortifications in Europe – made a huge impression upon the *Comando Supremo*; but by then, the training school had already been established and the first batch of officers and trainers had been selected. These operations, logically, did not result in the creation of the training school, but they did contribute to fast-tracking the training program of the Italian parachute units. A directive of *Comando Supremo* of July 1940, for example, called for more extensive training and for familiarizing standard infantry units with the tactics of the German paratroops.[8]

The initial influences that led to the establishment of a parachute school came from Italy's experiences during World War One and from military developments within the Soviet Union and France during the 1930s, rather than Germany. During the last year of World War One, an *ardito* – Lieutenant Alessandro Tandura – was the first soldier to jump by parachute. His mission was to be dropped from a *Savoia-Pomilio SP3* on the Austrian-held side of the Piave River to conduct a sabotage mission. Since Tandura was a native of the Austrian-held town of Vittorio Veneto, it was envisioned that he would be able to embed himself in the community and spy on the enemy's defensive organization and its troop movements. On the night of 9 August 1918, Tandura was ejected from his plane and landed on a vineyard near Colle Umberto. For three months, the *ardito* meticulously collected and relayed key intelligence to General Enrico Caviglia – commander of the 8th Army Corps. The latter would assert after the war that thanks to Tandura's efforts, his

7 David Irving, R*ommel: The Trail of the Fox* (New York: Wordsworth Editions, 1999); Colin Smith and John Bierman, *Alamein: War Without Hate* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2001).

8 Ufficio Storico, Circolare n. 2100: 'Difesa dall'azione dei paracadutisti', Stato Maggiore Regio Esercito-Ufficio Addestramento, 23 July 1940.

army – in the Battle of Vittorio Veneto in October 1918 – 'entered into action with full knowledge of the enemy's overall strength and troop deployment'.[9]

Tandura's jump remained a unique event of World War One, since during the 1920s, the Italian Army did not push forward with the development of airborne units. In addition, throughout that decade, its High Command paid little attention to the discipline and no provision was made to train even a small parachute unit. The latter began to concern itself again with the paratroopers as a result of developments within the Soviet Union, as Greene and Massignani assert: '… Soviet maneuvers of the thirties which featured large-scale employment of paratroops…'[10] created significant interest in Italy. The Soviet Union began to train airborne units in 1930 – and in 1934, 46 of its soldiers were dropped by parachute in a training exercise. In 1935 and 1936, the Soviets carried out two separate major parachute drops, with the first involving 1,200 soldiers and the second involving an even larger force of 5,200 – the magnitude of which were unprecedented for the time. Incidentally, these Soviet training maneuvers were observed by General Francesco Saverio Grazioli – one of the 'fathers' of the *arditi* assault units – during the First World War. Grazioli had been so positively impressed by these exercises that upon his return to Italy, he became one of the key proponents of an Italian parachute school.

The French also had positively evaluated the use of airborne units after witnessing the Soviet maneuvers of 1935.

For French military specialists, the tactical role envisioned for the paratroopers was:

1 Small-scale sabotage working behind enemy lines
2 Vanguards to be dropped from the sky – being the first component of a much broader infantry assault

This view, which sought to deploy the paratroopers in small-sized, sabotage-type operations, was also shared by the Italian High Command. In the view of the Italians, the paratroopers were seen as a specialty elite unit and separate from standard infantry formations.

In June 1936, the Italian *Comando Supremo* authorized the formation of the first paratrooper battalion. The initial orientation of the Italian High Command, however, like the French, differed from the Soviets in that it envisioned deploying the paratroopers in rather limited infiltration and sabotage operations behind enemy lines. For this reason, the new discipline was to be comprised initially of only one (or maximum two) paratrooper battalions with extensive engineering and sapping experience.[11]

Despite the initial authorization, for many years no progress was made toward the establishment of the parachute school due to bureaucratic infighting within the armed forces. While the *Regio Esercito* wanted to control the development of the discipline, the *Regia Aeronautica* sought to incorporate it within its training centers. Eventually, when World War Two broke out between Germany and the Allies, these differences and rivalries were quickly brushed aside and the parachute school was established in October 1939. The original plan for the school was for parachute training to commence in January 1940, while during the first six months of its existence, the school was to concentrate its efforts upon the development of its core training staff. The latter was subdivided into four sections – each of which was led by a senior officer. Captain Paolo Cosso was put in charge of the equipment section, with a special focus on parachute research and development.

9 Enrico Caviglia, *Vittorio Veneto* (Rome: Edizioni Luce, 1924), p.78.
10 Jack Greene and Alessandro Massignani, *Rommel's North Africa Campaign*: *September 1940-November 1942* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1999), p.173.
11 Giacomo Biffi, 'Il Paracadute' – *Rivista di Aeronautica*, n. 2, 1936, pp.155-162.

Captain Vincenzo Caratti was assigned to the airborne section and Captain Giovanni Verando was assigned to infantry training, while Lieutenant Felice Loffredo was put in charge of the sapper section. This relatively small group of senior officers was responsible for developing the training curriculum, as well as for procuring the necessary equipment, such as the parachutes, weapons, mobile transport and aircraft to commence training the first battalions. Since in January 1940, the school still lacked the most basic equipment from the necessary number of aircraft to the parachutes, additional delays were experienced. As a result, the first class of trainees began formal training only in July 1940 – a month after Italy had entered the war.

During the summer of 1940 – following the highly successful deployment of German paratroopers in Holland, Belgium and France – the Italian High Command began to exert pressures upon the leader of the Tarquinia Parachute School to expedite the constitution of the airborne battalions.

One of the ways in which this pressure was exerted was by sending to Tarquinia an inspector from the Office of Training and Operations of *Comando Supremo*. His insightful progress report, issued on 28 May 1940, revealed the following:

1 Airfield facilities- The school's facilities are comprised by the main barracks, a small office building and a tower for jump training.
2 Trainees- Currently, there are approximately fifty trainees that will constitute the future core training staff of the school. It is expected that this unit will be ready by 30 June 1940.
3 Paratrooper battalions- The head of the school indicates that the first group of volunteers will begin training on 1 July 1940. Training is expected to last three months. During that time the troops will be taught how to jump by parachute as well as receive instructions centered upon combat training for sabotage operations behind enemy lines.

   Each airborne battalion will have an initial strength of 270 soldiers. Each battalion will be subdivided into three companies, while each company shall be subdivided into three platoons.
4 Timeline- It is estimated that during the first year of training a total of six battalions will be readied for combat duty.
5 Equipment- The school currently does not have an adequate number of parachutes. At this point, with the few parachutes that have been secured so far, the school is unable to even train a single battalion at a time.[12]

The report uncovered that a number of severe delays – mostly of a bureaucratic nature – had derailed the original timetable. It outlined the school's severe shortage of equipment and the fact that its footprint was not large enough and could only accommodate a few hundred soldiers at the time. The report also underscored the hasty manner in which the school had been established, as well as the early orientation of the Italian *Comando Supremo* and other high-level military circles, which at the time, maintained that the proper deployment of paratroopers was for rather limited, small-sized sabotage operations.

The start of formal training was also delayed by other deficiencies: the lack of proper equipment and weaponry initially greatly undermined the potential of these airborne troops. In 1940, the only weapons available for training were hand grenades, pistols and model 91/38 rifles. The first recruits, for example, reacted very negatively to the lack of proper weapons.

12 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 34/1bis: Colonnello Arturo Ravagli, 'Promemoria per l'Eccellenza il Capo di Stato Maggiore Generale-Sopralluogo del Colonnello Ravagli alla Scuola Paracadutisti di Tarquinia', Comando del Corpo di Stato Maggiore all'ufficio di Stato Maggiore della Regia Aeronautica.

A status report issued in late 1940 revealed that troop morale had been weakened by the improvised nature, which characterized much of the training. Moreover, it also underlined that many trainees felt that the school's leaders had made no progress in procuring proper weapons for the new discipline:

> Generally, the paras' weapons should be more versatile and effective than those used by standard infantry units. The Breda hand grenades and the Carabinieri pistols, for example, are not suitable for airborne operations. They both not only lack firepower but are also too light. With these weapons the paras would most likely be outgunned by the enemy while conducting sabotage operations. Moreover, they would offer little protection from anticipated enemy counterattacks…. This is the general impression of the trainees, which have expressed the desire to have a greater input into the selection and development of the proper weapons for their discipline.[13]

It would take a year for the most pressing issues to be addressed. In fact, by the end of 1941, the problems related to the lack of proper weaponry had been partially addressed. The soldiers at the base could then count on a greater variety of weapons and also on more effective equipment. The *Breda* model 37 machine gun and the *Beretta* pistol model 38 MP – both effective weapons by 1941 standards – were, by then, beginning to be used during training. There was also plenty of ammunition for both fire practice and for rehearsing specific drills and maneuvers. Heavier artillery units were also brought in as a result of the incorporation into the paratrooper division of an *alpini* artillery unit. Some limitations, however, continued to plague the development of the new discipline. In the realm of anti-tank weaponry, for instance, all that was made available to the paratroopers was the vastly outdated 47/32mm gun – a rather ineffective and fairly antiquated weapon by 1942-43 standards. This weapon was fairly light, and hence, could be dropped by parachute; however, the downside to the 47/32mm gun was that it lacked firepower and could only harm enemy armor at very close range. In addition, the only other weapon that was made available to the paras to contrast enemy armor was the flamethrower, which was practically useless against heavier units, such as Matilda or Crusader tanks. At best, the flamethrower was effective against light armored vehicles or when deployed to suppress an enemy machine gun strongpoint.

Some of the issues related to the proper weapons for the airborne units were also widely discussed during a visit to the Tarquinia Airfield by General Bernhard Ramcke in March 1942. The purpose of the visit by the highly qualified German parachute officer was to inspect the *Folgore* Division in light of the planned joint German-Italian attack against Malta. Despite Ramcke's generally positive assessment on the division's overall combat readiness, some of his remarks made apparent that some of the *Folgore's* individual and crew weapons were too light – especially in relation to the tough task of overcoming highly fortified positions on the island of Malta. Ramcke, for example, pointed out that the *Beretta* 38 MP machine gun was an excellent weapon for close-range combat, but that it was not widely distributed amongst the ranks. This weapon, in fact, was only used to equip the officers and NCOs mainly because of low production outputs during 1941-42. The Italian *Breda* hand grenades were too light for the purpose of overcoming concrete gun emplacements situated on the coast of Malta – and Ramcke also pointed out that the 47/32mm anti-tank gun was obsolete by 1942 standards and had to be replaced with a heavier gun similar to the German 75mm gun. The armament problems in relation to the planned attack on Malta would, apparently, have been solved through German assistance.

13 Marco di Giovanni, *I Paracadutisti Italiani: Volontari, Miti e Memoria della Seconda Guerra Mondiale* (Gorizia: Editrice Goriziana, 1991), p.81.

After his visit, Ramcke made a formal request on behalf of the Italians to the German High Command for the supply of the following weapons:

- 800 Mauser rifles
- 550 anti-tank rifles
- 275 mortars
- 275 machine gun pistols[14]

These weapons were to be shipped to Italy a month prior to the attack on Malta. Ultimately, the weapon shipment was halted as a result of the cancellation of the airborne operation – and thus, when the *Folgore* left for North Africa in July 1942, some of its weaknesses (especially in the field of crew served and individual weapons) had not been fully addressed. Second, troop morale during the first year was weakened primarily by several deadly accidents caused by a defect in the Italian-manufactured parachute, the *D39 Salvator*, which in some cases, did not open properly. The parachute's opening system was too cumbersome; it not only took too long to open during the jump, but it also would tend to work well only when it had been folded properly: 'As military parachuting was still largely in its infancy in 1941-42 and by no means as safe as it is today, it was not for instance, general practice to carry a reserve chute in case the main canopy did not open'.[15]

Since the Italian equipment was prone to fail, parachuting in its earliest stages was a very dangerous undertaking. Between 24-26 July 1940, four paras died during jump training when their parachute failed to open properly. As a result of these deadly accidents, training was suspended for two months. As soon as jump training resumed, there was another casualty – again caused by defects in the parachute. The incident, in turn, caused further delays by putting jump training on hold once again. Prior to the loss of these five trainees, the parachute school had already suffered two casualties when a soldier and an officer, while diving from the tower, failed to land on the jump sheet and landed on the concrete. These deaths caused severe consternation amongst the ranks of the trainees and the head of the school was forced to suspend training operations for several months.

During the winter of 1940-41, troop morale had also been further battered by the lack of activity due to the poor weather and the suspension of training. A trainee expressed that:

> Each one of us knows that the parachute is not working properly. The deadly accidents of the past months have greatly undermined our morale and few of us want to continue to conduct jump practice. The tension is also very apparent amongst our instructors. They are very tense and extremely apprehensive whenever they have to push one of us from the aircraft during jump training.[16]

The problem was ultimately addressed through a collaborative effort amongst the allies. In early 1941, a delegation from Tarquinia visited Germany's Stendal Parachute Training School – and as a result of this visit (in March 1941), the Italians were able to introduce the IF.41/SP parachute, which was manufactured in Italy, but was modeled on the higher-quality German model. With the new, safer parachute, training recommenced and a rigorous selection process was put in place.

14 Enrico Canevari, *La Guerra Italiana: Retroscena della Disfatta*, vol 2 (Rome: Tosi, 1948), p.542.
15 John Bierman and Colin Smith, *The Battle of Alamein: Turning Point, World War Two* (New York: Viking, 2002), p.266.
16 di Giovanni, *I Paracadutisti*, p.142.

Another issue that plagued the instruction center during the first year was the lack of transport aircraft. During the first year of training, the Tarquinia Parachute School only had 10 *Caproni* model CA 311 aircraft for parachute training. These planes were not spacious, were very slow and largely outdated – therefore, given the scarcity of aircraft available, only one (or a maximum of two) battalion could be trained during the typical three-month training cycle. In addition, there were also problems related to the future deployment of these troops in airborne operations: '*Regia Aeronautica*', argued a top secret document issued by the Italian Air Force in 1941, 'currently does not possess enough transport aircraft for airborne operations. The fleet of *Savoia Marchetti 81* planes, which would be suitable for such a deployment, is currently being utilized to supply our troops in North Africa. The only way in which this fleet could be made available to the paras would be to suspend these flights to Africa'.[17]

The transport problem related to moving large numbers of paratroopers during airborne operations surfaced in early 1941. At the time, the *Comando Supremo* was evaluating paratrooper deployment for an attack on the islands of Corinth and Corfu, as well as for the participation of Italian units in the German-planned attack on Crete. In light of the scarcity of transport aircraft, the head of the Italian Air Force recommended that the Italian Government put forth a request for German assistance – specifically, for the *Luftwaffe* to lend one of its transport fleets to be deployed temporarily for special airborne missions in the Mediterranean. The problem was never fully resolved during the course of the war – mainly because Germany did not have enough transport aircraft, combined with Italy's slow production rate. Based on Italy's 1941 manufacturing capacity, the *Comando Supremo* estimated that a large-scale airborne operation, that envisioned dropping all of the battalions of the *Folgore* simultaneously, could only be attempted in mid-1943.[18] During 1941, production of the *Savoia Marchetti 81* was ramped up considerably, but by the summer of 1942, the air force still did not have a dedicated fleet with a carrying capacity large enough to be able to transport the *Folgore* Division. Malta's invasion, the *Regia Aeronautica* warned in early 1942, could proceed only with German assistance. Not only did the air force lack an adequate number of *Savoia Marchetti 81* planes, but it also did not have troop-carrying gliders.[19] Eventually, the final preparations for the planned attack on Malta relied heavily on German logistical support. The Germans had agreed in April 1942 to provide airborne support by making available a fleet of *Junkers JU 52*, which would have transported the majority of German and Italian airborne units during the attack on Malta; they had also set aside a fleet of gliders for the drop of vanguard airborne units into Malta. Ultimately, with the cancellation of the planned assault on the island fortress, the logistical issues presented by dispatching the *Folgore* Division to North Africa were solved by transporting a few of its units at a time on *Savoia Marchetti 81* planes over a month-long period.

Lastly, the German influence on the Tarquinia Parachute School needs to be dealt with. As indicated earlier, there were a number of foreign experiences that served as early examples for the constitution of the Italian parachute units. The German *Fallschirmjäger* variant began to be noticed in Italy mainly in 1940 when a military *attaché* at the Italian Embassy in Berlin began detailing their deployment. It was pointed out, for instance, how the German paratroopers were not utilized in small sabotage operations, but were an integral part of large-scale *blitzkrieg* maneuvers. At Eben Emael in May 1940, the German paratroops attacked the impregnable fort armed with special high-explosives. The following day, after having unsettled the fort's defenders, the paras – in collaboration with the 151st Infantry Regiment – took control of the strategic position

17 Cited in di Giovanni, *I Paracadutisti*, p.92.
18 Ibid., p.94.
19 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 2/1, foglio 171: 'Direttive di Superaero', 19 April 1942, p.1.

and obtained the surrender of its 1,200 strong garrison. This action was followed up by a broad advance by German armored and infantry units. More akin to the Soviet example, the deeds of the *Fallschirmjäger* captured the attention of Italy's military circles – and later, on their tactical deployment, would cause a rethink of the Italian paratroopers' own tactical mission.

A particularly strong military collaboration with the German paratroopers commenced in 1941 when its technical specialists helped the Italians to develop a more secure, higher quality, parachute based on an original German patent. Axis paratrooper collaboration intensified even further between 1941-42 during preparations for the invasion of Malta, with some German officers also playing a part in training the soldiers of the *Folgore* Division; for example, General Bernhard Ramcke made several trips to Tarquinia in 1942 and worked closely with the Italians to improve the training scheme. In addition, General Major Kurt Student inspected the Tarquinia base in June 1942 when last-minute preparations were being made for the planned invasion of Malta. Lastly, the jump smock and the helmet of the Italian paratroopers – and some of their equipment – were modeled on the uniform of the German *Fallschirmjäger*.

The original tactical task assigned by the Italian military to the paratroopers was rather limited. Their contribution was sought for small-sized sabotage operations in support of a broader infantry advance.

The original tactical deployment and the objectives of the paratroopers were outlined by Giovanni Verando, who was responsible for infantry training and tactics development at Tarquinia. 'The paras', his position paper asserted:

> … will be called to operate deep into enemy territory. Given the nature of the deployment, the paras can expect to operate with a very limited number of weapons and supply of ammunition. The focus of such sabotage units will be to attack in depth the enemy defenses. After the jump, the paras shall:
> - Collect their weapons and assemble into small but autonomous combat units.
> - Sever telephone and electricity supply wires in order to isolate the enemy's fortified positions.
> - Take out enemy sentries with such weapons as knives and bayonets in order not to cause widespread alarm amongst the enemy.
> - Block access to the fortified position by taking control of all roads in the surrounding areas.
> - Neutralize any enemy response through the use of machine guns.
> - Attack the enemy position with hand grenades, anti-tank guns and mortars.[20]

Initially, the deployment of the paratroopers was intended for vanguard, sabotage-type operations, where small units preceded a more massive infantry deployment.

This initial orientation, however, began to change when the Italian High Command started to take notice of *Fallschirmjäger* operations in 1940. A further reappraisal of paratrooper deployment came about as a result of the development of detailed operational plans for the takeover of Malta. For the proposed invasion of the island fortress, for instance, it was later envisioned that a much larger airborne force be deployed to guarantee the success of the operation. Planning for such an operation brought about a rethink on the deployment of the airborne units and, ultimately, led to the constitution of one paratrooper division consisting of a headquarters, three parachute regiments, artillery support and a sapper/sabotage battalion. During the meeting between the two High Commands at Klessheim on 27 April 1942, General Cavallero stated that the ultimate goal

20 Cited in di Giovanni, *I Paracadutisti*, p.125.

of the Italian High Command was to raise a much larger airborne force than originally envisioned. As the massive invasion of Malta was on the horizon, the plan was to train eight battalions by the end of June 1942.

Recruitment, parachute jumps and tactical training

The *Folgore* had established special recruitment procedures, being the Italian Army's only volunteer formation. As a result, any soldier from other units of the Italian Army could apply to enter into the paratrooper school, but the selection process was fairly rigorous. The school was based within the Tarquinia air force base, which had an airfield and a tower, which was 65 meters high and had 17 floors. Training was centered upon this tower, where the soldiers would complete a number of practice jumps and various other exercises. The first days were taken up with admission tests. During the first day at the airfield, the trainee was subjected to a lengthy medical exam and to an interview with the commander of the base. Both were meant to test the physical, mental and emotional fitness of the candidate. The interview, in particular, focused upon the candidate's prior military experiences and was aimed at gauging the candidate's suitability for airborne operations. Some of the typical questions were:

> What is your rank?
> Which wars/battles have you fought in?
> Did you carry out any special assignments or missions while in combat?
> Explain your attitude toward the war?
> Why did you choose to come here?

The second day was reserved for physical exercises in order to further screen the candidates and weed out the undesirables or the unfit. Accordingly, the trainees had to make two jumps from the tower: one consisted of a fast descent from the tower while holding on to two ropes, and the other by base jumping into a canvas.

The following are the recollections of Gino Compagnoni, who would later be assigned to the 6th Company of the *Folgore's* II Battalion:

> As I make my way up the ladder the tower begins to swing wildly back and forth. At the half way point I encounter an officer, who immobilized by fear, hangs on firmly to the ladder. The instructor yells out to go around him. I slowly bypass him and ultimately reach the top flight and the launch pad. I then make my jump helped down by a nudge to the shoulder from one of the officers. Half way down the parachute opens up and I land on the ground safely. I have just passed my first test….
>
> The second test consists in [*sic*] jumping from the top of the tower with no parachute onto a jumping sheet. Once again a number of officers and soldiers that precede me are overcome by fear and refuse to jump. This test marks the end of their stay at Tarquinia.[21]

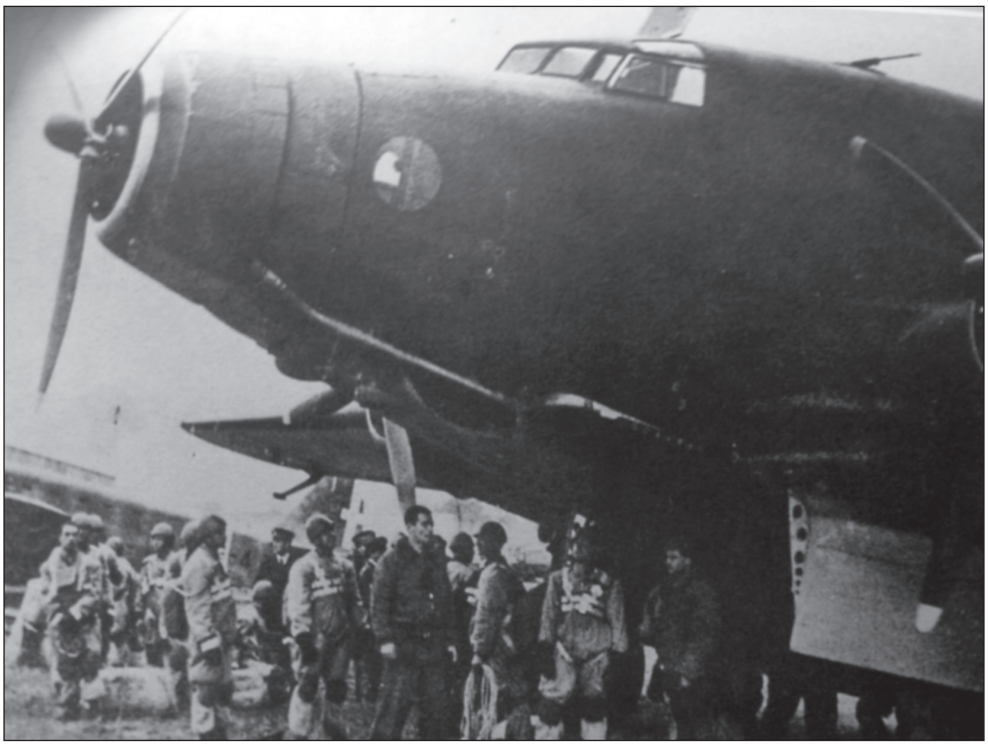
A third pre-screening procedure engaged the trainee with flying on an aircraft. An officer would take his recruits on the plane for a 30-minute flight – and once the plane had reached a certain altitude, the officer would open the back door and, one by one, push the head of his recruit outside

21 Gino Compagnoni, *Altri Tempi* (Brescia: Edizioni Arti, 2012), pp.134-135.

the door for 20 seconds. If the recruit panicked and lost his composure, he would typically be sent back to his battalion of origin.

The rejection rate amongst the volunteers was approximately 58 percent. Most of the rejected candidates were released during the first few days of training. Accordingly, 21 percent of those rejected failed the medical exam; 20 percent failed one or both jumps on the second day of training; 10 percent failed to make the first parachute jump; 3 percent were rejected because they buckled under pressure during the first flight; and 4 percent were released after having received their parachute license (mostly because of their poor disciplinary record). Both the officers and the NCOs were also volunteers, and so were also subjected to a rigorous selection process. More than 50 percent of the officers and NCOs were rejected after the first few days of training.[22]

Parachute training consisted of different stages of development and it lasted approximately three months. Initially, training was intended to last eight months, but as the Italian military faced grave difficulties in North Africa and in Greece – and badly needed new recruits for frontline deployment – it was decided to significantly shorten the training period. The morning was generally dedicated to physical training, such as running, marching, swimming and learning hand-to-hand combat skills. The afternoon was dedicated to specific exercises aimed at introducing the soldier to the basic skills required for parachuting, such as the proper way of jumping from an aircraft; how to properly unfold and fold the parachute; how to properly guide the parachute at landing; and how to land.



Italian parachute training; initial paratroop training took place on the special tower that had been built at Tarquinia. Once the soldier had familiarized himself with jumping from the tower, he graduated to jump from a plane. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

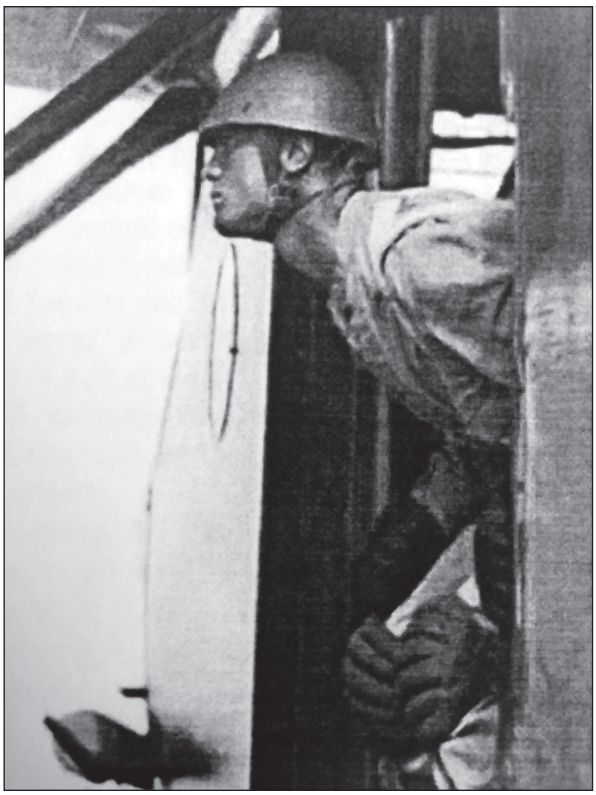
22 Emilio Longo, 'Le Scuole Paracadutisti dell' Aeronautica' – *Rivista di Aeronautica*, no. 6, 1981, p.94.

Italian parachute training; the initial parachute that was used by the Italian paratroopers was not reliable. Its main defect (i.e. not opening properly) caused several deaths during the first year of training. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Parachute unit rifle training in Tarquinia, spring 1942. The basic unit of the *Folgore* was the platoon (comprised of one NCO and eight soldiers), which was the carrying capacity of the *Savoia Marchetti* SM81. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Italian parachute training; practice jumps were made during training, as well as during the final test, before the soldiers were awarded their paratroop license. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

A group photo of *Folgore* soldiers in Puglia during the summer of 1942; note the camouflage uniform and the kneepads that were used specifically by the paratroopers during jump training. (Gino Compagnoni)



Folgore soldier parachute training. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Parachute training; the jump smock, the gear and the parachute were inspired by German *Fallschirmjäger* uniforms and models. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

The paratroop soldier has just landed during jump training and is reconnoitering the landscape with his gun trained. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Parachute training; it was only with the introduction of the new type of parachute – the IF.41/SP – that the Italian paratroopers developed into a viable discipline. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Two drills were repeated over and over again. They involved jumping from dummy doors just off the ground and descending with a rope from the first three floors of the 65-meter high tower:

> The real training begins. I do not experience any difficulties in carrying out what is expected of me. The key is to learn how to properly jump from a height of about 14-16 meters without breaking my back. I want to remark that the Folgore was different from other units of our army. Every training exercise was first conducted by the officers followed by the soldiers. Those that could not complete an exercise, would be sent back home regardless of rank or how many medals they had.[23]

Generally, relations between officers and soldiers in the Italian military were not good, due mainly to the caste mentality of the officer corps: 'The exceptions were above all the officers of the alpine troops and of elite units such as the Folgore, where common danger, specialization and esprit de corps created a bond between ranks that overcame the officer's corps' hierarchical mentality'.[24]

The officers of the *Folgore* would, in fact, be expected to set the example for their troops and would generally perform the parachute exercises along with their subordinates. The final stage of the training consisted of completing five jumps from the aircraft – ranging between 250-400 meters. Each jump had to follow certain procedures: first, after having jumped from the aircraft, the trainee was expected to free-fall for approximately 50 meters. Second, the parachute canopy had to be opened. Third, once the parachute had opened, the trainee had to grab the automatic gun (officers and NCOs) or the rifle (infantrymen) from the holster, which was typically located on the right leg. Fourth, he had to land safely by rolling over a couple of times to cushion the impact and then stand up and be ready to fire the weapon. There were two reasons why the weapon had to be taken out of the holster during the jump: first, if the landing was executed with the gun in the holster, the trainee was likely to get hurt on impact with the ground. Second, the trainee had to man his weapon upon landing to simulate an actual deployment. Since in most operational jumps, such as Crete in 1941, the paratroopers were fired upon even before landing on the ground, the trainees were taught to fire their weapons right away, if need be, after having landed. The short jumps from 200 to 250 meters were particularly risky, because the trainee was expected to follow all of the above procedures, but within a much shorter timeframe.

The most nerve-wracking experience during the drill – even for experienced paratroopers – was not the ejection from the plane, but the subsequent 20 to 40 seconds which were spent wondering whether the canopy would open properly. The reason for this was that even after the safer parachute had been introduced in 1941, there were still a number of injuries sustained by some of the paratroopers as a result of the canopy not opening properly.

The *Savoia Marchetti* SM81 was the aircraft that was used for the final drills. Initially, it was designed as the leading aircraft of Italy's bomber force and saw action in both Ethiopia (1935-36) and Spain (1936-39). By 1940, the *Savoia Marchetti* SM81 had become outdated as a bomber aircraft because of its low speed and it was replaced by the *Savoia Marchetti* S.79 *Sparviero* torpedo bomber. As a result, during World War Two, the 300 strong *Savoia Marchetti* SM81 fleet was utilized primarily as transport aircraft. Its carrying capacity, however, was relatively small compared to similar German or Allied planes, as it could only transport one platoon (one officer and eight paratroopers) at a time.

23 Compagnoni, *Altri Tempi*, p.135.

24 MacGregor Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940-43* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.147-148.

The paratrooper-specific training lasted for approximately three months and ended when the trainee had successfully completed a number of parachute jumps and had obtained his license. What followed was a year-long period of combat training aimed at achieving two main goals: first, the development of cohesive military units made up by soldiers that were motivated and physically fit. Second, the molding together of units that could readily be deployed in operations of major strategic importance.

This second phase of the training was centered on rehearsing maneuvers with combined arms exercises, aimed at improving artillery-infantry co-operation and the interaction between assault and machine gun units.

Volunteer Gino Compagnoni recalls a number of drills that were administered to his machine gun platoon:

> We began target practice with a Breda 37 machine gun and we also learned how to maneuver as a team while launching hand grenades. We also practiced various attacking maneuvers while simulating real combat conditions. We learned how to properly carry and then drop the machine gun to the ground and how to quickly position it against enemy defenses. We were also taught how to properly recover our weapons after jumping from the aircraft and how to assemble for the assault. Finally we learned various tactics intended to deepen our understanding of both defensive and offensive maneuvers.[25]

Another paratrooper recalled that:

> In addition to practicing rifle and machine gun target shooting at the range, we would conduct many of our drills and combat training on the Pallanza. This small hill near Viterbo was climbed, ascended, attacked, conquered and defended repeatedly during a series of tactical maneuvers. During these drills we honed various techniques such as leading a counter-attack while accompanied by the coverage of light machine gun fire, or how to defend our stronghold by putting down heavy mortar and machine gun fire. At that time some of our units were also sent to Civitavecchia to familiarize themselves with explosives. Here we honed sapper techniques such as how to assault enemy fortifications with torpedoes and demolition charges, how to neutralize enemy tanks with hand grenades, Molotov cocktails and flamethrowers and lastly how to construct minefields. Moreover, both officers and soldiers were required to attend driving courses.[26]

Key drills focused upon a number of close-range battle tactics to repulse armored attacks. As the anti-tank defense was one of the major weakness of standard Italian infantry units, the paratroopers were purposely instructed on how to contrast enemy tank formations with light anti-tank weapons such as flamethrowers, automatic rifles, hand grenades and small artillery guns.

The lack of proper anti-tank weapons during the first year of the war had to do primarily with the lack of recognition by Italian military elites of the centrality of mechanized warfare during the 1930s and 1940s. Italy's entry in the war had been premature with respect to its actual capabilities and resources, and its army was forced, after the first year of operations, to adapt to mobile warfare. As Cappellano and Pignato have argued, the Italian High Command in 1940

25 Compagnoni, *Altri Tempi*, p.138.
26 di Giovanni, *I Paracadutisti*, p.125.

had underestimated the relevance of anti-tank tactics and weapons.[27] This resulted in a number of major defeats at the hands of the British in North Africa when infantry units experienced great difficulties in defending against armored formations (primarily because of the lack of effective anti-tank gun screens). By 1941, the situation had further deteriorated, as the Italian military had no effective weapons of defense against heavier British armor. This led to the formation in early 1941 of specialized anti-tank assault units armed primarily with bottles of petrol triggered by hand grenades (*Breda* mod. 35) and other makeshift devices such as the SRCM 35 hand grenade, which was attached to a small wooded stick, and the *Pazzaglia* bomb, which constituted a hand grenade secured to a canvas filled with explosive. The Molotov cocktail, in particular, was widely used by the Italian Army in North Africa. It consisted of a quart bottle of gasoline with a gasoline-soaked towel attached to its base. The infantryman would light up the cloth and throw the bottle at the tank. Upon contact with the tank, the bottle would explode and the tank would be engulfed in flame. Molotov cocktails and other makeshift weapons were to be integrated with anti-tank guns and mortars – thus offering infantry units a wider variety of weaponry to deploy against enemy tanks in close-combat situations. Thanks also to the improved ability by the infantry to dig itself in the desert landscape – with the construction of various fortifications such as trenches, pits, anti-tank valleys and ditches, dugouts and minefields, which were aimed at slowing down (and even immobilizing) enemy tanks – the Italian divisions in North Africa obtained greater depth in defense. The first dedicated tank assault platoons were constituted in North Africa within the *Granatieri di Savoia* Division, with soldiers from the grenadiers, *alpini* and b*ersaglieri* branches. By the end of 1941, infantry units in North Africa were armed with 45,000 Molotov cocktails, while more than 50,000 new makeshift devices where being assembled in deposits in Libya.[28]

The Italian military had, by then, gained over two years of experience in fighting British armored units in North Africa – and it was beginning to take much-needed `countermeasures to rectify its shortcomings. In addition, its training staff had been able to familiarize itself with numerous German directives and reports regarding the armored warfare that was being waged in Eastern Europe. While facing the Soviets and their powerful T-34 tanks, the German units had been forced to create small anti-tank units whose specific task was to provide defense from armored attack. As a result, the Germans had assembled dedicated anti-tank units, which were organic to standard infantry battalions. Like the Italians, the Germans lacked viable anti-tank guns to pierce Soviet tanks and, as a result, they had turned to makeshift devices to fight against enemy armored units.

Based on battlefield experience in North Africa and the lessons learned from German infantry experiences in the Soviet Union, the Italian High Command – with a directive issued in late 1941 – urged division commanders to institute specialized tank-hunter platoons and assault units. These units had already been formed ad hoc by battalion commanders, and had already been deployed periodically. This directive was, in turn, aimed at institutionalizing the tank-hunting units:

> Moral and physical ascendancy can be achieved by infantry units fighting against enemy armor. Molotov cocktails have proved to be a suitable weapon in close range combat against enemy tanks. In these types of situations with enemy tanks approaching at close range and where anti-tank gun weapons can no longer be deployed effectively, Molotov cocktails become an essential weapon for infantry units. It is therefore vitally important that every infantry division should establish small, but highly specialized anti-tank units and train them

27 Filippo Cappellano and Nicola Pignato, *Andare Contro i Carri Armati*: *L'Evoluzione della Difesa controcarro nell'esercito italiano dal 1918 al 1945* (Udine: Gaspari Editore, 2007).

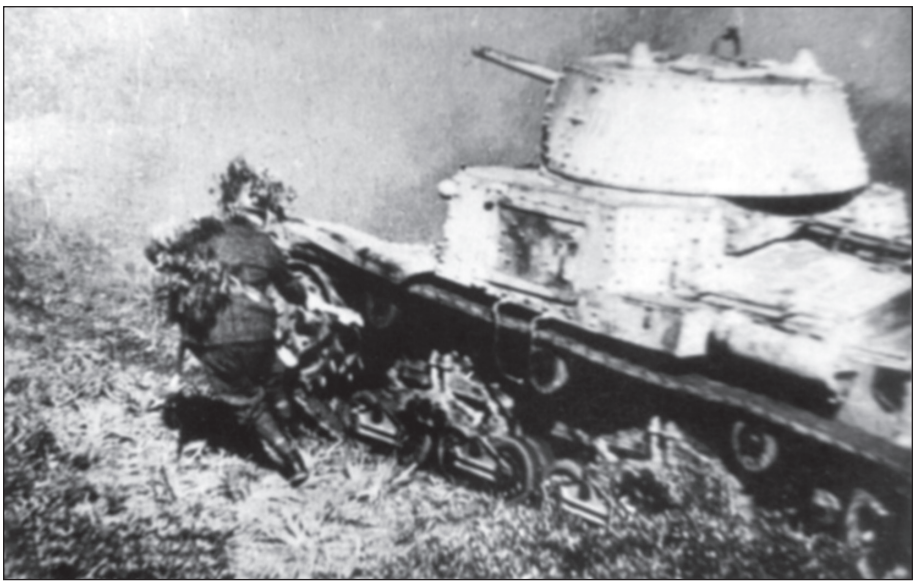
28 Ibid., p.285.

> to master launching both hand grenades and Molotov cocktails. Training should center on practicing the launch of such devices at a distance of 20-30 meters. When infantry units are attacked by enemy tanks, they must hold their positions by hiding in their trenches or dugouts and by ambushing the tanks with their weapons. In close range combat situations, tanks aim to steamroll infantry units. But if the latter are deployed in well-concealed positions such as in a deep trench, behind a bolder or a bush they can effectively counteract enemy tanks with these incendiary devices.[29]

The directive went on to explain that the effectiveness of petrol and hand grenades as anti-tank weapons depended upon different factors: first, they proved more effective when utilized in concert with other weapons – mainly mortars, automatics and anti-tank guns. The former, in fact, could be utilized proficiently – especially when enemy tank formations had been first attacked and dispersed by heavier anti-tank weapons. Once the enemy armored units had been split up, individual tanks could be more successfully attacked by the tank-hunter platoons. While anti-tank guns would focus their fire on the tank's tracks in order to immobilize it, the machine gunners and rifleman would focus on targeting the tank by disorienting its crew. Although Molotov cocktails and hand grenades were not heavy weapons, their psychological impact upon tank crews could be significant. On impact against armor, these weapons produced huge flames which, in many cases, induced the tank crews to abandon their vehicles. The latter would then be burned with flamethrowers, while the crew members would be captured. Second, the directive stated that Molotov cocktails and hand grenades proved more effective when used in conjunction with smoke grenades, which could disorient tank crews and allow the assault units not only to get closer to the tank, but also to better aim their weapon against its most vulnerable components (generally, its tracks or the engine deck). Smoke bombs, in particular, were one of the best weapons of the tank hunters, as they concealed their movements and whereabouts. Third, training in close-in attack against armor was essential and should be based on daily aiming exercises against captured enemy tanks. Training was to focus on the knowledge of the weak parts of the tank (tracks, underside, engine decks, any small window or opening) and on the effective use of anti-tank weapons. The directive also called upon division commanders to encourage the co-operation of all anti-tank units (machine gun, field artillery, anti-tank artillery and tank hunters) during training with live ammunition.

The paratroopers, by virtue of the fact that they received the most comprehensive training, adopted many of these infantry tactics in their training repertoire and slowly evolved into elite anti-tank tactical units. The specific reasons laid in the atypical deployment of the paratroopers. First of all, paratroopers, for the most part, had the same weapons of standard infantry units – thus, they also lacked an effective anti-tank gun and necessitated to make up for the deficiencies in their weapons by familiarizing themselves with other individual anti-tank devices. Second, it was originally envisioned that the paras would be deployed in airborne operations to secure strategic positions located in the rear of the enemy's defenses, such as an airport, a military or a logistical base, a weapons factory etc. As part of vanguard elite, their role was to take and hold these positions at all costs until relieved. They were also taught to counter-attack when necessary to hold onto their positions while facing both infantry and armor. In spite of the offensive emphasis given to the paratroopers, their main goal was, fundamentally, a defensive one; for example, in holding a strategic enemy asset at all costs, the paratroopers performed (essentially) a defensive mission.

29 Ufficio Storico: Comando Superiore Forze Armate Africa Settentrionale, 'Istruzione provissoria sulla bottiglia incendiaria BAC', 1941.



An Italian infantry soldier during a tank-hunting training exercise. The soldier appears to be placing an explosive device on the tracks of the tank. The tactic was very dangerous and could only work against a tank that was isolated from its combat unit. If more than one tank were in the vicinity, the tactic would likely backfire, as the other units would machine-gun the tank hunter. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Folgore Division paratroopers in Puglia in the summer of 1942. The camouflage uniform and jumpsuit was used during the airborne operation in Malta. It was substituted for a more sand color-type uniform when the unit was dispatched to North Africa. (E.G. Vitetti)

In North Africa, this defensive tactical disposition was adopted with some success during such operations as 'Beresford', 'Braganza' and the last Battle of El Alamein. During Operation 'Braganza', for example, the paratroopers trapped and boxed in their enemy within their ring of fire. British troops were allowed to advance deep into the defensive positions, and then all of a sudden – at close range – the paratroopers used their machine guns and hand grenades to attack the enemy from the rear and from the flanks. This unpredictable tactic disoriented enemy forces and allowed the paratroopers to attack both infantry and armor from different directions. The armor was dealt with primarily by the close-range anti-tank screen, while disabled tanks were later burned by the specialized tank-hunter platoons using flamethrowers, hand grenades and petrol. The armored vehicles were properly attacked at close range from well-concealed positions, with a combination of anti-tank guns, grenades and flamethrowers.[30]

The evolution of the *Folgore* Division

The first group of volunteers, which came primarily from the *Carabinieri* (the Italian Police), began training in Tarquinia in July 1940. This first 400 strong paratrooper battalion was deployed in North Africa as a light infantry unit to halt the British advance in Cyrenaica. While the paratroopers stood their ground – thus allowing the bulk of the Italian X Army Corps to retreat successfully – their ranks were decimated in this defensive action by the British armored units. Its few survivors were then sent back to Tarquinia. The second group of volunteers arrived at Tarquinia in August 1940 and it was drawn primarily from infantry and *bersaglieri* units. A third group came from the air force, while the fourth from the cavalry. In August of 1941, another battalion from the *alpini* – equipped with artillery pieces of 75mm *Ansaldo M35* howitzers – was also attached to the parachute units.

During the spring of 1941, a number of experienced officers were transferred to the airborne school. These were mostly proven leaders, with plenty of experience gained during the First World War, the Colonial Wars and the Spanish Civil War. The majority of these officers came from the cavalry (Paolo Marenco, Costantino Ruspoli, Carlo Ruspoli, Alberto Bechi Luserna, Guido Modrone and Aurelio Rossi), while some came from the alpine troops (Riccardo Bignami) and from the artillery (Ernesto Boffa). The cavalry units had been made almost redundant by the prominence of the tanks and heavy artillery weapons, while the *alpini* and artillery units that joined the *Folgore* brought to the table extensive skill sets. These officers and the infantry units, with the addition to the survivors of the first battalion of the *Carabinieri*, constituted on 30 March 1941 the first core of the Parachute Division.

On 1 September 1941, this unit was put under the command of General Francesco Sapienza and also named as '*I Divisione Paracadutisti Folgore*' ('First Division *Folgore* Patatroopers'). It included three infantry regiments and one artillery battalion. Each regiment had approximately 1,500 men, while the smaller artillery battalion had 460 men. General Sapienza's tenure, however, lasted only a few months, as he was brought down and forced to resign by a disciplinary investigation into some of his actions during the Greek campaign. His place was taken by General Enrico Frattini in early 1942. Frattini was selected for the job because he was already familiar with the paratroopers – having previously worked on a plan for an airborne invasion of the island of Corinth in 1941. The decision to select Frattini, according to several sources highly critical of the Italian High Command, was facilitated by the fact that none of the major generals wanted the position: first, in order to command the *Folgore*, the candidate had to successfully complete a parachute jump. Most

30 Piero Crociani and Pier Paolo Battistelli, *Italian Army Elite Units & Special Forces, 1940-43* (Botley: Osprey, 2011), p.28.

General Enrico Frattini – commander of the *Folgore* Division.
(Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

generals, many in their early fifties, were not fit enough to complete such a daring exercise. Second, the position was also deemed to be too risky – especially in light of the planned invasion of Malta, which most experts maintained would have resulted in very heavy casualties.[31]

At the time Frattini took command of the *Folgore*, it consisted of the following units: 1st *Reggimento Paracadutisti*, comprised of the II, III and IV Battalions; 2nd *Reggimento Paracadutisti*, comprised of the V, VI and VII Battalions; 3rd *Reggimento Paracadutisti*, comprised of the IX, X and XI Battalions; and VIII *Guastatori Paracadutisti* (paratroop trench busters) and I *Reggimento Artiglieria Paracadutisti*, which was comprised of *Gruppi* 1, 2 and 3. Each of these artillery groups had eight 47/32mm guns and twelve 81mm mortars.

Shortly after, the unit began training for the planned airborne attack of Malta – and most of the training was conducted in Tuscany, where the soldiers completed a number of trial runs on the beaches and the nearby hills. The last part of the training was conducted in the village of Ostuni in Puglia. The reason for this is very simple: this area of Italy resembles Malta's countryside, where stonewalls abound – interspersed every 50-100 yards by enclosed orchards and vegetable gardens. It was considered the most suitable place for the paratroopers to carry out final drills by overcoming these obstacles while lodging heavy weaponry, such as the 81mm mortar and the 47/32mm gun.

While stationed in Puglia, the paratroopers received their equipment and weapons for the operation. A machine gunner, for example, was armed with a *Breda 38* gun (with numerous rounds of

31 di Giovanni, *I Paracadutisti*, p.132.

ammunition), a *Beretta* 9mm pistol, four hand grenades, a parachute kit, compass, flashlight, gas mask, a rucksack containing enough food for two days, water, a first aid kit and, finally, a camouflage uniform.[32] The uniform, in addition to the camouflage jacket, also included mountain-type trousers, high black leather ankle-boots, gloves, knee pads and a standard Italian steel helmet (with a special lining and a neck protector). The paratroop special insignia consisted of a badge with a dagger and parachute that was worn on the left upper arm. The operation against Malta would have also involved the airdrop of the anti-tank guns and the ammunition, which would have been dropped in separate loads (by means of specially-colored parachutes) and in special canvas sacks. The sacks had different markings which indicated their contents, such as the individual components of the gun or the ammunition. The gun, for instance, was dropped in four components.

Ghino Borgogni, an officer of the VI Battalion, remarked the following regarding the equipment of the *Folgore*:

> Once we were assigned to our units we also received our equipment. The equipment was excellent and represented a vast improvement over the weaponry and equipment of standard infantry units. The helmet was different, it was round and was fitted with an internal protective padding. The camouflage jump smock was also different and it came with gloves, a pair of knee pads, and a pair of comfortable boots and socks. The weapons included a knife, a shorter version of the infantry rifle with a foldable bayonet and a Beretta model 38 automatic gun which was very effective within a range of 100 meters.[33]

Regarding the Malta operation, General Major Kurt Student – the commander of the German paratrooper regiments – mentioned in his war memoirs that 'over a period of months the Malta operation was prepared down to the smallest detail, and during that time the parachute troops practiced on mock-ups of these positions'.[34] While the Italian military assumed the overall responsibility for developing the plan for the Malta invasion, General Major Student was charged with leading the airborne component. In this capacity, the German officer assumed responsibility for conducting a series of joint drills which were based on the intelligence gathered during reconnaissance missions over Malta by the *Regia Aeronautica*. Actual models of the key British fortifications on Malta were developed and the parachute units practiced ways in which they could be approached and, subsequently, captured.

During June 1942, Student visited Tarquinia Airfield to inspect the *Folgore*. On that occasion, he remarked that the division had been well trained and that it was ready to undertake the Malta operation. He noted that its only weakness was a lack of proper weapons in certain key areas – especially a viable anti-tank gun – and equipment, such as vehicles. In his view, the lack of an effective anti-tank gun diminished the firepower of the division – especially if tasked with eliminating key artillery fortifications on Malta. The lack of mobility due to the lack of vehicles meant that once the paratroopers had been deployed, they did not have the means to extricate themselves from the battlefield.

Regarding the *Folgore's* preparation, Albert Kesselring – *Luftwaffe* commander-in-chief for South Europe – would later state in his post-war diary that 'the exercises at which I was present showed the men were the right material'[35] for airborne operations.

32 Compagnoni, *Altri Tempi*, p.138.
33 Massimo Borgogni, *La Guerra di Ghino*: *dai Monti d'Albania alle Sabbie di El-Alamein: 1940-1942*: *Memorie di un Soldato* (Siena: Nuova Immagine, 1996), p.161.
34 Cajus Bekker, *The Luftwaffe War Diaries* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), p.51.
35 Albert Kesselring, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Kesselring* (London: W. Kimber, 1953), p.121.

Military and intelligence reports written in 1942 state that the majority of the *Folgore* paratroopers were eager to participate in the attack against the island fortress,[36] while a small minority of the men believed that the operation would entail heavy casualties.[37] It is likely that the operation would have involved the same, or an even higher, number of casualties suffered by the German paratroopers during Crete's Operation 'Mercury'. During early July, however, the operation to take Malta was unexpectedly canceled due (primarily) to disagreements between the Italian and the German High Commands. This decision did away with the *Folgore's raison d'*être and, as a result, the unit experienced yet another organizational reshuffling. Its name was changed to '185th *Divisione Paracadutisti Folgore*' and its regiments were merged into two infantry units: 186th and 187th *Reggimento Fanteria Paracadutisti*. The artillery became the 185th *Reggimento Artiglieria Paracadutisti* and the sappers were renamed 185th *Battaglione Guastatori* – thus the division was comprised of three paratroop regiments:

- 186th Regiment with V, VI and VII Battalions
- 187th Regiment with II, IV, IX and X Battalions
- 185th Regiment had all the support functions – including III, XI and VIII *Guastatori*

Each infantry regiment had its own anti-tank gun and mortar company, with six 47/32mm guns and six 81mm mortars. Each infantry battalion had approximately 500 men, 40 pistols, 360 rifles and 54 sub-machine guns. The basic unit of each battalion was the company; the smallest unit was the platoon, with eight soldiers and one officer. The overall strength for the *Folgore* as a whole in July 1942 was the following: 84 officers, 443 NCOs and 5,732 soldiers.

Since, in July 1942, the operation for which the *Folgore* trained for had been canceled, the Italian High Command was faced with the decision of where to deploy it: 'Suddenly, during the third week of July 1942, the Division was dispatched to North Africa. At the time, no reason or specific operational assignment were given for this choice of deployment'.[38] While the infantry units were transferred to Africa in small groups by plane, all of the heavy weapons were transported by ship. This caused some delays and the division was ready for frontline deployment only by the first week of August. Although the parachute kits had also been shipped to North Africa, it quickly became apparent that the *Folgore* would not be utilized for an airborne assault, but would instead be used to prop up the Axis defenses at El Alamein as light infantry. With this turn of events, the *Folgore's* General Staff quickly realized that its units lacked adequate firepower and vehicles for the new – and more defensive-minded – assignment:

> The Folgore's lack of heavy artillery units was not tackled by the Italian High Command even when the Division was tasked with defending a large sector of the El Alamein line. In addition to the Division's own mortar and anti-tank units, it was assigned only two additional artillery units (one of 100/17mm and one 75/27mm guns) and one Flak 88 battery.[39]

It was apparent from the beginning of the *Folgore's* North African campaign that it clearly lacked an adequate number of heavy guns to effectively contrast – and fight on par with – the British

36 di Giovanni, *I Paracadutisti*, pp.154-155.
37 Sisto Bodriti, *I Grifi* (Reggio Emilia: Tipografia Caselli, 1973), pp.35-37.
38 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 1160/C/1: Divisione Folgore, 'Relazione del Tenente Colonnello Giovanni Verando, capo di Stato Maggiore della Divisione Folgore, Relativa alla Divisione Paracadutisti Folgore ed al suo impiego sul Fronte Egiziano nel periodo luglio-novembre 1942', p.5.
39 Ibid., p.3.

armored units. In addition, the *Folgore's* General Staff were not blind to the division's overall supply and logistical difficulties:

> The problem related to the lack of vehicles to resupply the Division with water, food and ammunition was also not fully addressed by the High Command. We were able to establish a very limited divisional transportation unit with vehicles we had shipped from Italy in addition to those we received from other infantry units in Africa.
>
> This mobile unit, however, had throughout the African campaign an insufficient number of vehicles to fulfill our needs.[40]

Both issues would later prove to be very detrimental to its survival at El Alamein, when after the British breakthrough in the north, the paratroopers were ultimately cut off from the bulk of the Italian and German troops and were forced to retreat on foot.

General Rommel received the paratroops as reinforcements in late July 1942, but initially expressed concerns about their suitability for the campaign. He argued that both German and Italian paratroop units were unsuited for desert warfare, and their dispatch to North Africa was part of a makeshift solution by the Italian High Command that did not address the real needs of his *Panzerarmee Afrika*, with its German armored units as its core. Upon their arrival, Rommel wrote in his diary: 'Elements of the 164th Infantry Division had been flown in from Crete, but had brought neither heavy weapons nor vehicles. Several units of an Italian Parachute Division, excellent troops by their appearance, also arrived at the front'.[41] Rommel believed that although these units appeared to be well trained and battle ready, their lack of proper equipment would result in a greater supply burden for his *Panzerarmee Afrika*.

Weapons

US INTELLIGENCE ON ITALIAN PARATROOP UNITS

b. Italy

While thus far there have been no reports of the employment of Italian parachute troops in any theater of operations, it is known that the Italians have recently been stressing this aspect of modern warfare in their training programs. The following details, also learned from captured prisoners, concerning the equipment and training of Italian parachutists are of interest.

(1) At the time of jumping, each parachutist is equipped with the following: a Beretta machine carbine strapped to his right leg, 400 rounds of ammunition, a haversack containing 40 grenades, 3 days hard rations, and 1 quart of water.

(2) Guns and ammunition are dropped in sacks by blue parachutes. For the purpose of easier identification, these sacks are marked with certain distinguishing symbols. Thus the sack containing the gun barrel is marked a yellow flag, that containing the wheels and trail with a blue circle, and that containing the carriage with a black circle. The ammunition is dropped in a sack marked with a red circle.

40 Ibid., p.7.
41 Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p.59.

(3) In the training of Italian parachutists, jumps are never made below an altitude of 300 feet. A feature of the training is the emphasis on speed in unloading a plane, and the jumping schedule calls for seven men jumping in an interval as small as 4 seconds.

[The above United States Intelligence Report on Axis airborne troops was originally published in *Tactical and Technical Trends*, no. 8, 24 September 1942.]

The lack of heavy weapons and transport vehicles placed the *Folgore* at a disadvantage to the better-equipped enemy units. While the standard British infantry division had (on average) 2,000 vehicles, 160 mortars, 162 light mortars and 136 anti-tank guns, the *Folgore* had no more than 150 vehicles, 18 mortars, no light mortars and 72 anti-tank guns.[42] Most importantly – unlike the typical British infantry division – the *Folgore* also lacked heavier artillery units to deploy against enemy armor, as historian Lucio Ceva asserts: 'The Italian Division's firepower was almost negligible in comparison with that of the British and Commonwealth. Yet the greatest weakness of the Italian units lay in their field transportation. While the British divisions were motorized, the Italians moved on foot just as in World War One'.[43] During the Battle of Alam Halfa, for instance, the *Folgore* had to hand-tow its guns during the 10-mile advance toward the British defenses of Deir el Munassib, while at the end of the Battle of El Alamein, it was forced to retreat on foot, which ultimately led to the capture of the vast majority of its men.

The *Folgore* – and basically all Italian troops in North Africa – lacked an effective anti-tank gun, and this handicap had to do with the pre-war dispositions of the Italian High Command. At the time, the Italian General Staff was convinced that Italy would end up fighting a war in the Alps against France or Yugoslavia, where it was envisioned that infantry was unlikely to encounter heavy tanks. For this reason, it was believed that the *Breda* model 35 47/32mm gun, which functioned much like a small mountain cannon, was a viable weapon to fight the type of war envisioned. In addition, once World War Two began, the High Command showed a high degree of inertia – ignoring the great relevance of armored tank units in Germany's successful campaign against France in 1940.[44]

The 47/32mm anti-tank gun had originally been developed for the type of mountain warfare that Italy experienced in 1915-18. It could be broken down in different components for mule or light vehicle transport, but it could not be towed. In the Egyptian Desert, the Italian Army lacked transports and, in most cases, the gun had to be towed by hand. The gun performed satisfactorily during the first year of the desert war against light armored vehicles armed with Vickers machine guns, Bren carriers and Matilda tanks. As Britain introduced bigger and more powerful tanks, the 47/32mm gun became obsolete because it could not penetrate heavy armor. In 1942, General Enea Navarini – commander of the XXI Army Corps in North Africa – outlined to *Comando Supremo* the operational issues related to the 47/32mm gun: 'The 47/32mm anti-tank gun has not performed well. It is unable to pierce British tanks. Moreover, infantry anti-tank units armed with such a weapon are too static'.[45] Fundamentally, General Navarini's report pointed out that the two main deficiencies of the 47/32mm gun unit were its lack of firepower and mobility. The lack of firepower of the anti-tank guns would force the 47/32mm artillery

42 Mario Montanari, *Le Operazioni in Africa Settentrionale* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1990), p.707.
43 Jill Edwards (ed.), *Al-Alamein Revisited* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000), p.14.
44 Ufficio Storico, *L'Esercito Italiano alla Vigilia della Seconda Guerra Mondiale* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1982), p.236.
45 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 1160/B/1/1: XXI Corpo d'Armata, 'Relazione del Generale Enea Navarini, comandante del XXI Corpo d'Armata'.

platoons to deploy the weapon within a quarter of a mile range of enemy armor, or else it had little or no effect upon it. At a distance of three quarters of a mile, its grenade could pierce light tanks or light and medium scout and reconnaissance vehicles, such as a Bren carrier. At a distance of a quarter mile, a grenade fired from a 47/32mm gun could pierce a medium tank with a 45mm thick steel plate. The gun was not effective against heavier tanks, and its only chance of success against these larger units was by aiming at the tracks, the turret or the back of the tank. As a result of this type of close-combat deployment, many anti-tanks units were captured or destroyed during the Battle of El Alamein primarily for being positioned too close to the enemy's line.

The lack of firepower was also determined by its inability to damage the more robust enemy tanks that were introduced in late 1941 and 1942. After 1941, there were only two somewhat productive ways to use the gun:

1 It was effective if the servers aimed at the tracks to immobilize the tanks
2 It was deployed in well-fortified defensive sectors – allowing the servers to aim for the more vulnerable sections of the tank, while the latter maneuvered to negotiate an obstacle (typically a trench or a ditch)

Overall, it was a poor weapon, but even in Tunisia in 1943, when it had become virtually obsolete, it was the only anti-tank gun supplied to Italian infantry units. Lack of technological innovation and a small manufacturing base did not allow for the design and the mass manufacture of a more powerful anti-tank gun unit.

The rifle used by the *Folgore* was the standard 6.5mm *Carcano* model 1891, which was also used by standard infantry units. The rifle came with a foldable bayonet. Hand grenades included the *Breda* M35, OTO 35 and the SRCM 35, which were less powerful than Allied or German grenades, and were generally very light. Italian grenades typically produced plenty of smoke, but had a low explosive charge.

The *Breda* 37 machine gun was the standard automatic of the *Folgore*. It was operated typically by a three-man unit. One soldier would fire the gun, the second soldier would be responsible for inserting the ammunition clips (28 rounds per clip), while the third soldier – armed with a rifle – would act as a sentry and cover both flanks of the firing point.

The Swiss-made *Solothurn* 20mm anti-tank rifle was also used by the Italian paratroopers as an anti-tank weapon during World War Two. It was called *Fucile Anticarro S* and it was employed either as a standalone infantry weapon, or mounted on vehicles. Each clip had 10 rounds and they were used primarily against light vehicles and tanks. It was effective at a range of 400 feet or less – and especially if positioned upon the flank of an enemy tank.

The 81mm model 35 mortar was a much more effective weapon. It was capable of firing both a 3.4 and a 6.8 kilogram high-explosive grenade, with a firing range of up to a mile. The fragmentation of both types of grenades was effective particularly against assaulting enemy infantry units, but also, in a more limited extent, against armored vehicles. This mortar proved to be very effective during the Battle of El Alamein, when it was used to repulse both infantry and armored units at a relatively close combat range.

Perhaps the most effective weapon of the *Folgore* was the *Beretta* model 38 MP 9mm submachine gun, which represented a vast improvement over the gun used by the infantry, the 6.5mm *Breda* model 30. While the former was relatively light (it weighed half as much as the American Thompson gun, which was used by both the British and the Americans), it was only carried by officers and NCOs. It was effective at a combat range of approximately a mile or less, and it fired ammunition at a rate of 600 rounds per minute – typically using 30- or 40-round magazines.

Conclusion

The Italian Army elite units of World War Two consisted primarily of the *bersaglieri*, *arditi*, *apini*, a few mechanized units (such as the *Ariete*) and the paratroopers. Many of these units would prove their worth during the course of the war – often fighting with poor weapons and equipment. Some of Italy's most important battles and key victories during the war saw the deployment of these special units, and one of the main factors that characterized their performance in the battlefield was their specific training and tactical deployment. With regards to the paratroopers, the first year of training was not very fruitful – mainly because the equipment was lacking and the parachute kit was unsafe, which made jump training extremely precarious. In 1941, various reforms in their training regimen were implemented, which led to an overall improvement in troop morale and preparation; but the third year of Italy's war represented a turning point, since by then, not only had the vast majority of the paratroopers successfully completed jump training, but they also conducted large-scale maneuvers that solidified the battalions into cohesive combat units. By this time, the weapons made available to the *Folgore* also represented a vast improvement *vis-á-vis* the equipment available in 1940.

In conclusion, what made the paratroopers stand apart from the standard infantry battalions during World War Two was a whole series of factors, but one of the most important was their training: 'The paras were the only units of the Italian Army that enjoyed the privilege of receiving adequate training. If only standard infantry units had received the same type of training, which would have put them on par with both Allied and German Infantry, their performance during the war would have most likely been of a higher standard'.[46]

A number of factors related to the paratroopers' training regimen accounted for their better performance in the battlefield: first, the paratroopers did a lot of physical training – hence, they were more fit. Second, in battle, they were able to handle their weapons (both individual and collective) more effectively thanks primarily to the type of drills and maneuvers rehearsed at training; in addition, training was conducted with live rounds of ammunition and few limits were imposed on the amount of ammunition that could be utilized. Third, in battle, the paras were effective when deployed in small groups, with each platoon carrying out specific tasks and responsibilities. This factor had to do with the high rate of specialization and the platoon structure of the paratroop units. At training, each soldier was required to familiarize himself with one weapon, while each platoon was assigned specific tasks (machine gun fire coverage, mortar interdiction fire, hand grenade assault etc.) when practicing assaults on entrenched positions. Fourth, both officers and soldiers were required to go through the same challenging training program, and this sharing of duties and responsibilities produced a higher morale than was typically found in the standard Italian infantry units.

The effectiveness of their training became evident on the battlefield. *Folgore's* Lieutenant Colonel Alberto Bechi Luserna in 1943, for example, issued an assessment of the *Folgore* during the North African campaign in which he argued that both anti-tank gun and tank-hunter units had worked well together.

With regards to the latter, Bechi Luserna would write that:

> Molotov cocktails had a psychological effect upon tank crews and that at times it was enough to engulf the tank in flames in order to force the crew to abandon their vehicle…. Properly handled incendiary devices, obtained good results when deployed against enemy armor….

46 Cited in di Giovanni, *I Paracadutisti*, p.3.

> Little by little flamethrowers were discarded in favor of incendiary devices and out of their crews specialized tank-hunter units were formed.[47]

Bechi Luserna then went on to point out that although the paratroopers fought only for a few months in North Africa, they quickly made their mark. Their specific training and recruitment practices contributed to their overall combat performance.

47 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 21B: Divisione Folgore, Relazione del Tenente Colonnello Alberto Bechi Luserna, 'Esperienze ed ammaestramenti tratti dall'impiego della Divisione Folgore', p.2.

2

Malta

Introduction

During World War Two, Malta was a key British naval and air base. The island was held by approximately 26,000 British soldiers and it was heavily fortified with numerous anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery emplacements to defend from a potential Axis invasion. From Malta's bases – centrally located in the Mediterranean Sea – Royal Navy submarine units and Royal Air Force fighter planes were continually dispatched to harass and sink Axis convoys *en route* from Italy to North Africa. These vital convoys – consisting of key supplies such as fuel, weapons and food provisions – were the lifeblood for the Axis forces deployed in North Africa.

The biggest threat to Axis convoys in the Mediterranean Sea came from the British submarine fleet based in Malta: the 10th Submarine Flotilla. This unit was responsible for the vast majority of the Africa-bound shipping losses – approximately one million tons of shipping (or 50 percent of the Axis losses during the war). During the first year of the war, the shipping losses were relatively few, with 45 ships and 161,423 tons lost. In 1941, after the British naval fleet achieved key victories against the Italians at the Battles of Taranto and Matapan, the losses significantly increased to 156 ships and 617,986 tons lost. In 1942, when the Italian Navy gained the upper hand in the Mediterranean, the losses decreased significantly to 138 ships and 480,652 tons, while total shipments to North Africa reached a two-year high. In 1943, the losses increased to 226 ships and 758,555 tons, as the Axis was on the decline in North Africa and was slowly disengaging from the continent.[1]

Malta's key contribution to the British war effort was recognized after the war by German Vice-Admiral Friedrich Ruge, who stated that: '… in the fight for North Africa, Malta played a decisive role as a base for the RAF, submarines, and light naval forces… The island was effective not only because of the actual results obtained by the bombers and torpedo bombers… but mainly because of the archenemy of the Axis convoys, the British submarines…'[2]

Especially for the Italians, who were responsible for supplying Axis troops in Libya and Egypt, Malta-based British naval and aerial capabilities became the major obstacle to their logistics operations in the Mediterranean. The fact that Malta posed a great threat to Italy's North African campaign was very quickly recognized. A few months after Italy's entry into the war, the Malta problem was already on the top of the agenda of the *Comando Supremo*. The Italian Navy pointed out that: '… at least 80 percent of our losses of our navy and merchant ships are caused by the fact that Malta is in enemy hands…'[3] Invading or neutralizing Malta in some way thus became a primary objective of the Italian military in order to control the Mediterranean Sea and secure permanently the sea-route to North Africa. Even Erwin Rommel, who would later (in 1942)

1 Marc'Antonio Bragadin, *The Italian Navy in World War Two* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1957), p.365.

2 Friedrich Ruge, *The German Navy's Story 1939-1945* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1957), p.251.

3 Jack Greene and Alessandro Massignani, *The Naval War in the Mediterranean 1940-1943* (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998), p.223.

become lukewarm regarding the invasion of Malta, had argued in May 1941 that without control of Malta, the Axis will end by losing control of North Africa.

Early invasion plans

On 14 October 1940, the Italian *Comando Supremo* ordered General Mario Roatta to develop a plan of attack against the island fortress and to begin preparations for a combined seaborne and airborne invasion. The first-draft Italian plan for the invasion of Malta was issued on 18 June 1941 by the navy. It envisioned two days of constant aerial and naval bombardment to destroy Malta's artillery strongpoints and deplete its stock of anti-aircraft munitions. This was to be followed by an airborne and seaborne assault 'by a force of 20,000 soldiers armed with light machine guns, grenades, knives, flame-throwers and light tanks'.[4]

Although it had taken almost a year to develop, this initial plan was still very preliminary. It had been developed primarily by naval officers without much input from the planners of the army or the air force, which were expected to play a key role during the invasion. With regards to this initial plan of attack, both the German High Command and *Comando Supremo* concurred that two pre-existing conditions were vital for the success of the operation: first, the Axis naval deployment during the planned invasion had to be large enough to prevent any interference by the Royal Navy during the seaborne landings. This meant that the operation could not be executed within a short timeframe, as the Italian Navy had to be given some time to assemble a more sizable transportation and battle fleet. Second, prior to the launch of the operation, the Axis naval and aerial forces had to inflict serious damage upon the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean in order to degrade its capabilities. With a weakened Royal Navy, the Italian *Regia Marina* would have been in a more favorable position to commit to the operation the vast majority of its naval fleet. This second consideration also implied that the invasion of Malta could not take place within a relatively short timeframe, as the Italian Navy was still reeling from the losses sustained at Taranto in November 1940 – as a result of which, in early 1941, some of its major ships were still under repair (thus for the Axis leadership, both the lack of troop transport vessels and the absence of naval and air supremacy in the Mediterranean meant that the Malta operation could not take place at least until 1942).

The sluggishness with which the Italian High Command and its navy had gone about in developing a plan of attack against the island fortress in 1940-41 was indicative of Italy's lack of overall – and clear – strategic goals during the war. The historian Lucio Ceva has argued that both Mussolini and the High Command entered the war without clear strategic operational objectives. Moreover, during the course of the war, they overstretched Italian military resources between the Eastern and the North African Fronts, while it would have been in Italy's best interest to focus upon its main theater of operations, which was primarily Libya and Egypt. Italy's largest field artillery batteries – including captured Austro-Hungarian howitzers during World War One, for example – were deployed in the Don area against the Soviet Union, while they would have probably been more effective in fighting British armored units in North Africa. Most importantly, an early invasion of Malta in 1940 would not only have been more feasible, since the British had not fully fortified it, but such an operation would have also facilitated the North African campaign by easing the pressure on the supply lines.[5] Most of the blame for not having attempted the invasion of Malta in 1940 stands with the then head of the *Comando Supremo*, Pietro Badoglio. The latter – the main culprit for the debacle at Caporetto in 1917 – failed to direct the navy to prepare

4 Mario Montanari, *Le Operazioni in Africa Settentrionale*, *v. 3* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1990), p.120.
5 Lucio Ceva, *La Condotta Iitaliana della Guerra: Cavallero ed il Comando Supremo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975).

a landing on Malta in the summer of 1940 'despite the fact that the island's defenses at that point consisted of five under strength British battalions, the local regiment, and three biplane fighters'.[6] Badoglio's successor, General Ugo Cavallero, was no better in terms of leadership and decisiveness, since by February 1942, he had not yet taken a clear position on when and how Malta should be taken.[7] In the meantime, in January 1941, Hitler had already committed some of his troops to the Southern European theater of operations. In an effort to help his ally Mussolini, Hitler offered to send to North Africa a small motorized blocking force to halt the British offensive into Libya. By then, Hitler had also decided to dispatch to Sicilian air bases a *Luftwaffe* bomber squadron – the *Luftflotte II* – to increase the pressure upon Malta. In February 1941, during a briefing with German Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, Hitler was first presented with a preliminary German plan to capture Malta through an airborne assault. The German admiral – a key advocate for the destruction of the island fortress – initially envisioned a German-only airborne operation led by one paratrooper brigade and the 5th and 6th Mountain Divisions. Hitler initially expressed interest in such an operation, but did not order the German High Command to immediately mobilize these troops. As a result, the latter and the German Navy refrained from taking any further steps to plan the attack against Malta.

It is important to note that both the Italian and the German initial plans for a takeover of Malta were developed independently, and also how the two Axis forces initially failed to work in a collaborative fashion. Unlike the Allies in 1942, the Axis powers did not have a combined chief of staff or High Command organization that could provide common and integrated military planning and strategy. As a result, there was a degree of competition between the two command structures and both made independent decisions by *fait accompli*, such as the start of Operation 'Barbarossa' by the Germans, or the attack against Greece by the Italians. In May 1941, Hitler postponed any preliminary German plan for an invasion of Malta by opting to launch an operation against the Greek island of Crete instead. By that time, the German High Command perceived the Royal Air Force base on Crete to be a bigger and more serious threat to German operations in the Balkans – thus on 20 May 1941, the Germans unleashed against Crete Operation 'Mercury', with a force largely comprised of those units originally earmarked to be deployed against Malta: 750 glider-borne troops, 10,000 paras, 5,000 mountain soldiers and 7,000 infantry soldiers. Their objective was to seize control of the island defended by approximately 41,000 British and Greek infantry troops.

During and after the landing on Crete, the German *Fallschirmjäger* units met strong resistance and could only take the Maleme Airfield after many hours of heavy fighting. The fighting was particularly intense, as the German units attempted to gain a foothold on the heavily-defended island. On the first day of battle, many paratroopers were killed while still airborne, while many were killed during the early exchange of fire with British infantry for control of the main airfield – but once the *Fallschirmjäger* took control of the airfield, reinforcements were able to land and the combined British and Greek defenses on Crete were eventually overcome after 11 days of fierce fighting. The German losses, however, were so severe – especially those in the paratrooper ranks – that Hitler from that point on became very skeptical with regards to the authorization of large-scale airborne operations. Incidentally, the first – and only – Italian airborne operation of World War Two also took place in the spring of 1941, during the tail end of the Greek campaign. On 30 April, one of the first parachute units (the 5th and 6th Companies of the *II Battaglione Paracadutisti*), which had trained at Tarquinia, were dropped from three *Savoia Marchetti 81*

6 MacGregor Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940-43* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.89.

7 Pier Paolo Battistelli, *Albert Kesselring* (Botley: Osprey, 2012), p.26.

planes and landed on the coast on the Greek islands of Cefalonia and Zante. This airdrop, by approximately 80 paras, was just a small component of a much broader seaborne operation aimed at seizing territory prior to the end of the Greek campaign. Despite several injuries during the drop – mainly due to the strong winds, which pushed some 16 paratroopers to land on the cliffs off Cefalonia – the paras were able to take control of the island and obtain the surrender of its 250 strong Greek military contingent.[8]

Despite Italian prodding – in June 1941 – Hitler once again decided to postpone the invasion of Malta, as the German High Command was, by then, fully consumed with planning Operation 'Barbarossa' and it was also still licking its wounds for the heavy casualties sustained during Operation 'Mercury'. Despite the abrupt German about turn for the Italians, the preoccupations with Malta and its British base had clearly not gone away. By mid-1941, British naval forces on Malta were responsible for sinking approximately 50 percent of all Italian cargo vessels *en route* to Libya.[9] The overall situation improved during the winter of 1941-42, as the Axis air forces commenced massive bombing raids over Malta, which resulted in the destruction of Malta's military infrastructure and the flight of the 10th Submarine Flotilla to Alexandria. The supply lines to North Africa were improved also as a result of the Italian Navy's effort, which used its battleships as escorts to naval convoys in the Mediterranean. With this new naval strategy, losses were sensibly reduced, as the British Navy was, for the most part, prevented from interfering with the convoys, as Knox asserts: 'Once German airpower and the battleship convoys overcame the crisis, losses were proportionately low until the final months of 1942, although concentrated cripplingly on tankers and on ships carrying ammunition and vehicles'.[10]

The air war against Malta had been further intensified in February 1942 with a combined German-Italian aerial operation. During the spring of 1942, this operation completed an average of 260 bombing missions per month – resulting in the destruction of numerous defenses, as well as some of the naval and aerial units stationed on the island. As a consequence of the combined effort, Malta was pounded at least three times a day for several months, and its British defenders and its inhabitants were given little or no respite. The offensive continued even after Hitler decided to transfer some of the *Luftwaffe* units from Southern European bases to the Soviet Union in support of Operation 'Barbarossa'. In May and June 1942, in fact, Malta remained the target of large-scale Axis aerial operations – mainly from Italian torpedo bombers, which caused further damage to the island's defenses.

Operation 'Herkules', or *Operazione* C3

Despite this fierce aerial campaign, Malta's military installations resisted the onslaught. The British base, although diminished in strength, still posed a threat to Axis convoys even though its success rate in sinking Axis convoys fell to its lowest ebb during 1942. Since the threat to Axis supply lines persisted, General Cavallero decided to fast-track preparations for an Italian offensive against Malta. His directive resulted in the creation of a dedicated Malta task force, but it also required the *Regia Marina* to constitute a dedicated seaborne unit: the *San Marco* Regiment – a special elite marine unit – thus began training for an amphibious role during the invasion of Malta.[11] The Italian Army was also required, by Cavallero's directive, to begin specific preparations for the

8 Ceva, *La Condotta*, pp.141-144.
9 Knox, *Hitler's Italian*, p.135.
10 Ibid., p.135.
11 In 1942, the regiment was eventually deployed in France and North Africa to garrison naval bases – and its most important operation of the war was when it crushed an attempted British commando raid on Tobruk. It would also see extensive fighting during the Tunisian campaign in 1943.

planned invasion with a dedicated unit comprised of the *Folgore*, *Superga*, *Livorno* and *La Spezia* Infantry Divisions. The *Folgore* and the *La Spezia* units would be deployed during the airborne assault, while the *Superga* and *Livorno* would take part in the amphibious landing. Spurred by Cavallero, the Malta task force began to refine the original plan of attack in early 1942. Early on during this process, the task force began to point out that critical German assistance was required to ensure success against Malta: first, the Italians requested that 40,000 gallons of fuel oil from the Romanian oilfields be set aside by the Germans for both naval and air operations against Malta. Second, more than 200 German *Junkers Ju52* aircraft were also required for the success of the airborne operation. The planners outlined that the Italian Air Force fleet of *Savoia Marchetti 81* planes was not large enough to transport the airborne units – thus, without key German support, the airborne operation could not be accomplished. Third, German troop-carrying gliders were also required to air lift and drop some of the paratroopers. The gliders were to be used during the first phase of the operation, when it was envisioned that a small sabotage unit would land to destroy Malta's main anti-aircraft defenses and pave the way for the bulk of the infantry units. The planners, in fact, pointed out that the Italian Air Force had entered into the war with few gliders and, by early 1942, it did not have the required number of units to carry out the operation.

Meanwhile, in November 1941, Albert Kesselring – the main architect of the aerial onslaught against Malta – had been appointed as commander-in-chief of Southern European operations. Kesselring, who was a first-rate military planner, at the time had become convinced that Malta posed a grave threat to Axis operations in the Mediterranean. With Kesselring's appointment, the Italians had gained an advocate for their own strategic military concerns, and who was also very influential within the German High Command. In February 1942, Admiral Raeder and General Kesselring met Hitler in a series of high-level meetings. Both German officers forcefully argued that the dismantlement of the British air and naval base was essential for an Axis victory in the Mediterranean. On 21 March, Kesselring held a further meeting with Hitler, in which he apparently convinced the dictator to re-evaluate the German position on Malta. It appears from several *Comando Supremo* documents that this meeting, in particular, was somewhat fruitful in pushing ahead for a planned invasion. The diary of General Cavallero, for example, reports of a meeting between Cavallero and Kesselring in late March, where the German general stated that Hitler now favored a prolonged siege of the island. It was also reported that Hitler was, by then, ready to make available for the operation a German paratrooper regiment in addition to the required *Junkers* transport aircraft fleet. The support that Hitler was now willing to provide would basically satisfy most Italian demands. Also, it appears from the entries in Cavallero's diary that Kesselring had urged the Italian High Command to launch the operation at the tail end of the Axis aerial bombing campaign in May or June 1942. This was to coincide with the transfer of the German *Luftflotte II* fleet from Sicily to the Soviet Union; however, it also appears that the Italian commander stated to Kesselring that his military was not yet ready, and thus unable to launch the invasion of Malta in late spring 1942. With regards to Kesselring's aggressive timetable, Cavallero expressed grave concerns in several journal entries. The following entry, for example, can be found in his diary: 'Will the bombing campaign be so effective as to weaken Malta's defenses to the point that the paratroopers will encounter little or no opposition? Moreover, will the paratroopers be ready by May or June?'[12] Cavallero's concerns are an important element – evidencing one of the reasons the Malta operation was eventually canceled (mainly because of poor planning on the part of the Italian High Command). In fact, not only did the Italian military lack some of the equipment necessary to conduct the operation autonomously, but it also did not have enough trained troops to deploy against Malta by late spring 1942.

12 Montanari, *Le Operazioni*, p.132.

Hitler and Mussolini met on 30 April 1942 in Berchtesgaden, Germany during the course of an Axis bilateral meeting, where the Malta problem was fully discussed. Hitler, as usual, took center stage and gave an overall positive assessment of the military situation of the Axis. Toward the end of his presentation, he also affirmed that Malta had to be seized with a *coup de main* with a joint operation, with both a seaborne and an airborne component. After Hitler spoke, the Italian High Command briefed the two leaders on the progress that had been made on the planned invasion of Malta. General Cavallero first assured both leaders that the plan and the make-up of the joint operation were being developed by the Italian military, in conjunction with German experts such as *Fallschirmjäger* Major General Kurt Student. The operation, Cavallero affirmed, would in fact involve both German and Italian troops, equipment and weapons. Second, he reiterated that Malta had to be seized because its naval base was still a major threat to Axis supply lines to North Africa. Without Malta demilitarized, he argued, Rommel's advance into Egypt would be mired in supply difficulties.[13] Field Marshal Kesselring also intervened – stating that: 'Malta has been neutralized by my bombers, but until it is occupied by the Italians we will be unable to stop the British air force. Our plan is now complete and has the approval of Italians and Germans. We need your final approval."[14]

Both dictators apparently agreed that Malta had to be invaded, but there were disagreements regarding the timing of the operation. While Cavallero argued that the invasion had to be launched as soon as possible – and possibly before the end of the summer in 1942 – the Germans, including Hitler, were less adamant. The German High Command, for example, argued that the British garrison of Tobruk in North Africa had to be dealt with first. Kesselring, in what appears to be an about face with respect to his earlier position, explained that if the Axis forces invaded Malta in late spring or summer, with the support of a massive joint German and Italian air attack, the British Royal Air Force would gain air supremacy in the Middle East and North Africa and would likely cause serious problems for Rommel's *Afrika Korps* – therefore, Kesselring forcefully emphasized that Tobruk and the British Eighth Army should be dealt with first. Once Tobruk had been seized and the British had been pushed off their advanced aerial bases in North Africa, Kesselring argued that the Axis forces would have been in the condition to also seize Malta. Both dictators apparently sided with Kesselring and reached a compromise solution: the Malta operation would be undertaken sometime after Rommel's army had seized Tobruk in June 1942. Operation 'Venezia' envisioned the capture of Tobruk, followed by a period of operational stasis for Rommel's *Panzerarmee Afrika* – thus enabling the latter to resupply and replenish its ranks prior to a final push into Egypt.

The Malta invasion was to be implemented prior to Rommel's final offensive in pursuit of the British base of Alexandria and the Suez Canal. As a result of this meeting, preparations for the Malta operation intensified and a plan for troop deployment was finalized. In late April 1942, *Comando Supremo* issued a directive for the mobilization of the Italian airborne and seaborne units that were expected to take part in Operation 'Herkules'. With regards to the paratroopers, it prescribed a number of drills and tactical troop maneuvers that were to take place in very rocky and rugged, Malta-like terrain. These prescribed drills were to be based on three tactical concepts: fire to overwhelm the enemy, surprise, and infantry-machine gun support units' co-operation. Some of the drills that were to be rehearsed were meant to simulate real battle objectives and conditions, such as the elimination of anti-aircraft units; the surrounding and takeover of an airfield; the destruction of critical infrastructure; the rapid deployment of light artillery and anti-tank units to effectively react to any British attempt to disrupt the siege; and the storming of

13 Montanari, *Le Operazioni*, p.134.
14 Santi Corvaja, *Hitler and Mussolini: The Secret Meetings* (New York: Enigma Books, 2008), p.203.

enemy outposts. The directive instructed the operational commanders that each drill was to be repeated multiple times.[15]

On 19 May, Kesselring and Cavallero submitted to Hitler and Mussolini the formal plan for Operation 'Herkules'. According to Kesselring, the plan for the invasion of Malta was based on the following elements:

> Attack by airborne troops to seize the southern heights as a jumping-off base for an assault to capture the airfields south of the town and the harbor of La Valletta shortly preceded by a bombing raid on the airfields themselves and anti-aircraft positions.
>
> Main attack by naval forces and landing parties against the strong-points south of La Valletta and, in conjunction with parachute troops, on the harbor itself, synchronized with bombing raids on coastal batteries.
>
> Diversionary attack from the sea against the bay of Marsa Scirocco.[16]

Operation 'Herkules' (or *Operazione* C3 for the Italians) would have been a joint Italian-German initiative requiring the collaboration of naval, aerial and infantry personnel and equipment. It would have involved up to 96,000 infantry and navy soldiers; 750 heavy, medium and light guns; up to 50 tanks; and 270 mortar units under the command of General Sogno. This was a much larger – and much better equipped – task force than the one that the Italians had originally envisioned in 1941. It also relied heavily on German support – especially with regards to the airborne equipment. In late May 1942, General Cavallero had formally requested German assistance in a few key areas to ensure the success of the Malta operation. Specifically, the request had been made for one German *Fallschirmjäger* battalion, 200 *Ju52* planes, 50 small glider planes and many tons of fuel. In turn, the *Regia Aeronautica* would deploy more than 1,500 aircraft for a massive aerial pounding of the island, which would precede the invasion. The Italians would also provide the vast majority of the infantry troops: first, the Axis plan envisioned a combined aerial bombardment of key defensive strongpoints on Malta – aimed at destroying numerous fortified pillboxes and other defensive installations situated close to the shoreline. Second, concentrated and repetitive air attacks would neutralize the island's anti-aircraft defense installations.

The second component would have involved the airborne operation, which would have totaled 15,000 soldiers (half of the paratrooper contingent was to be provided by the Germans) under the command of Major General Kurt Student. The success of the airborne landing hinged upon the element of surprise and the ability of the paratroopers to set up a bridgehead on the island.

A small German *Fallschirmjäger* unit was to land first in gliders to prepare the ground for the airborne assault – mainly by focusing upon crippling the anti-aircraft batteries, the infantry nucleus and the machine gun posts surrounding the airport. This was to be followed by the bulk of the airborne operation, which was comprised of two German *Fallschirmjäger* regiments and the *Folgore* Division, and their respective anti-tank gun sections, as Greene and Massignani assert:

> The paratroop landing area was to have been on the west side of the island, and was selected for two reasons. First, it was to allow the paratroopers to clear and then protect the amphibious beachhead area. Secondly, the paratroopers were to seize an airfield as quickly as possible,

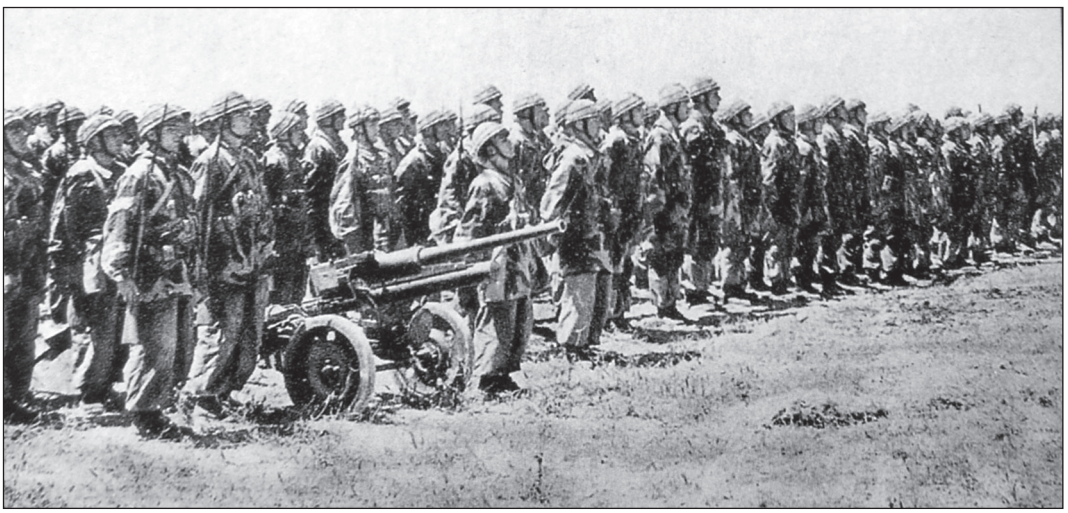
15 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 17/B: Stato Maggiore del Regio Esercito, 'Norme di impiego di grandi unita' di assalto e di sbarco', 13 April 1942.

16 Albert Kesselring, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Kesselring* (London: W. Kimber, 1953), p.123.

> so that the Italian air-transportable La Spezia Division and more supplies could be brought in if transport was available.[17]

Once the three combat units had all landed successfully, they were to be deployed against La Valetta's fortified defenses – mainly in destroying the large artillery field guns.

The airborne operation would be followed by two amphibious landings at two different locations on the south-eastern side of the island. The invasion fleet would have fallen under the command of Vice-Admiral Vittorio Tur, who was responsible for safely transporting the troops to Malta and also for providing off-shore gunfire support during the landings. The *Regia Marina* had assembled a large force for this *coup de main* – consisting of four battleships (*Littorio*, *Vittorio Veneto*, *Caio Duilio* and *Andrea Doria*), four heavy cruisers, eight light cruisers and 21 destroyers. While escorting the convoys, the naval combat units were expected to pound upon the island's defenses, as well as prevent the Royal Navy from interfering with the landings. The Italian Navy would also deploy 150 vessels of all different sizes, while the German Navy would contribute 46 ships to carry the troops and effectuate the amphibious landings. The first units of the amphibious force would land near La Valletta on the first night of operations and combine forces with the paratroopers, while the second amphibious force would land on the second day along with another unit, whose task was to conduct the planned diversionary attack. The amphibious landing would also include an armored component – comprising of 20 German *Panzer* IIIs, 40 Italian medium tanks and some L-3 light tanks; and eight *Semoventi* 75mm self-propelled assault guns, an unspecified number of Italian 90mm guns and 75mm anti-tank units. The tank and artillery units would have been deployed during the second day of the operation and their role entailed shelling La Valletta's fortified defenses into submission, while also clashing with enemy armor. After the landings had been executed, the Axis naval fleet would have surrounded the island in a *cordon sanitaire* – preventing the Royal Navy from coming to the aid of the besieged island.



The *Folgore* Division somewhere in Puglia – prior to the trip to North Africa. One can see a Cannone da 47/32 M35 light anti-tank gun in the front row, as well as the original camouflage uniform that was to be used by the *Folgore* during the airborne operation against Malta. Such a uniform was obviously not suited for the desert campaign in North Africa. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

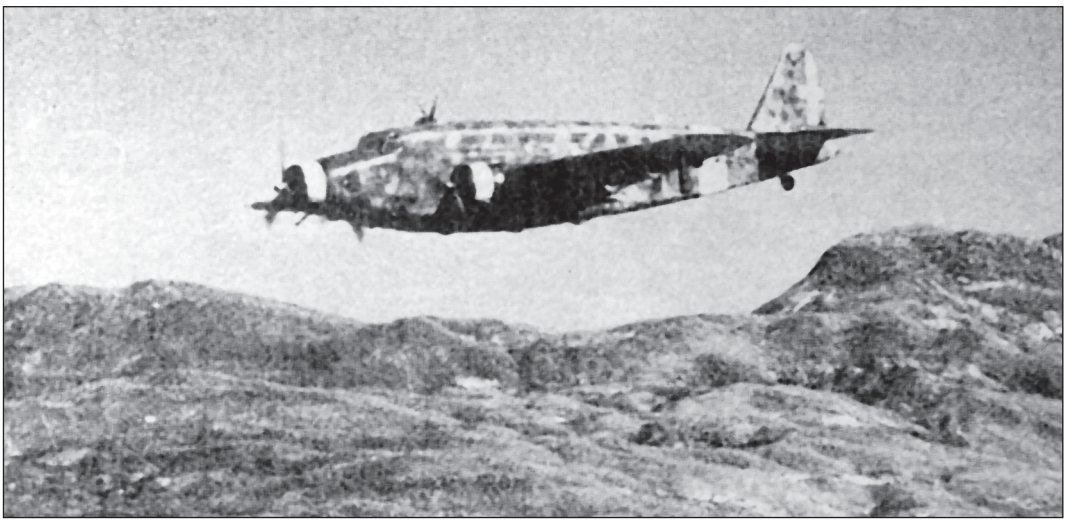
17 Greene and Massignani, *The Naval War*, p.226.

Major General Student and Mussolini review an Italian weapon during the former's visit to the Tarquinia *Folgore* training camp in spring 1942. The weapon appears to be a Carcano carbine. While Student was generally impressed with the *Folgore's* training, he was much less impressed with its weapons – especially the light anti-tank gun. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

A *Folgore* officer; senior officers carried a pistol, while other lower-level officers and NCOs carried the 9mm *Beretta* M38 light machine gun. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Mussolini reviews the *Folgore* Division in the spring of 1942. This photo was probably taken at the Tarquinia Airbase or in Tuscany, where the division was training for the planned airborne operation against Malta. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

The *Folgore's* Captain Marco Cristofori – commander of 12th Company and one of the last to surrender in November 1942. (The Cristofori Family)



A camouflaged version of the *Savoia Marchetti 82* aircraft. The aircraft was powered with three *Alfa Romeo* 128 RC 21 9-cylinder air-cooled radial engines – each capable of 860 hp at 6,900 feet altitude. The maximum speed was 205 mph at 7,000 feet and the range was 1,160 miles, or 6.8 hours. The armament consisted of one 7.7mm free machine gun in the forward fuselage (with a 60° traverse), one 12.7mm free machine gun in the hand-operated dorsal position just aft of the cockpit (with a 360° field of fire) and two 7.7mm free machine guns in the lateral positions – each capable of a 65° traverse. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Flamethrower training with flamethrower model 41. The weight of the model 41 was 40 lbs and it had a range of 17 to 22 yards, as well as a fuel capacity of 1.75 gallons. The fuel used was a mixture of nine volumes of heavy oil and one volume of gasoline. The duration of a continuous jet was five to six seconds. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Prior to the summer of 1942, the *Folgore* Division was considered as a strategic asset at the disposal of the Italian Army to be deployed only in special missions. Unlike any other infantry division, it was under the direct command of *Comando Supremo*, which was the only entity that could decide where to deploy it. As previously mentioned, the paratroopers had been trained for an airborne operation against the British stronghold of Malta. Through combined air and sea landings, the Axis powers hoped to eliminate Malta as a key British base and secure an uninterrupted flow of supplies across the Mediterranean Sea to their forces fighting in North Africa. The planning for this attack, although discontinuous, had been extensive and had been based on comprehensive air reconnaissance of the enemy's defensive positions to the point that major artillery positions and fortifications had been identified and analyzed. Major General Kurt Student would later claim that 'we even knew the caliber of the coastal guns, and how many degrees they could be turned inland'.[18] Rommel, however, was able to capture the key British garrison of Tobruk in North Africa in June – and despite agreeing to the Operation 'Venezia' plan and timetable, he asked for permission to continue the advance into Egypt. At Tobruk, Rommel captured 33,000 Commonwealth soldiers, 2,000 vehicles and many artillery pieces.

With these additional resources – and believing that the British Eighth Army had been dealt a massive blow – Rommel forcefully made the case that he could advance into Egypt and seize the Suez Canal and the oilfields. Kesselring and Cavallero were both opposed to Rommel's plan. Kesselring maintained that Malta should be occupied prior to further advances into Egypt, while Cavallero wanted to first secure the Axis gains in North Africa by reinforcing the *Panzerarmee Afrika* with additional troops. Both insisted that it was more important to eliminate Malta and consolidate the gains in North Africa, rather than begin a new offensive into Egypt – thus stretching precious Axis resources. Both also maintained that Rommel's supply situation was precarious and that a more conservative approach was necessary in order to wage a long-term conflict of attrition with the British Eighth Army.

Ultimately, Hitler was persuaded by Rommel and, on 23 June, wrote a letter to Mussolini – stating:

> If I, Duce, can give you, in this historic moment which will not be repeated, my most heartfelt advice, it would be this: order the continuation of operations to seek the complete destruction of British forces to the very limits of what your high command and Marshal Rommel think is militarily possible with their existing troops. The goddess of fortune in battle comes to commanders only once, and he who fails to seize the opportunity at such a moment will never be given a second chance.[19]

Mussolini, who was also enthusiastic over Rommel's successes at Gazala and Tobruk – and whose ultimate aspiration was to enter into Alexandria – decided, against the advice of his own army chief of staff and Kesselring, to back Rommel. Ultimately, as Greene and Massignani put it: 'Rommel won the argument, partly due to Hitler and Mussolini's support, as well as to the mirage of the defeat of the Commonwealth'.[20]

In order to carry a new offensive into Egypt, Rommel had requested that more troops be sent to his army in Africa. He had specifically requested more armored and mobile divisions, while he had adamantly warned the Italian *Comando Supremo* that he did not need more infantry divisions due

18 Cajus Bekker, *The Luftwaffe War Diaries* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), p.51.
19 Corvaja, *Hitler and Mussolini*, p.205.
20 Jack Greene and Alessandro Massignani, *Rommel's North Africa Campaign* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1994), p.168.

to their lack of mobility and their general unsuitability for the desert war. At the time, *Comando Supremo* argued that it had no armored divisions at its disposal to send into North Africa. Its leader, Cavallero – apparently lacking any viable alternatives – decided to reinforce the Italian-German *Panzerarmee Afrika* with the *Folgore* Division.

The justification for this decision was based on the temporary deployment of this elite unit to reinforce frontline defenses:

> The paratrooper battalions have been assigned to the Panzerarmee Afrika in order to stem its constant attrition of both men and material. Once the Axis defenses have been bolstered, these battalions will no longer be deployed on the front line. The commander of the Italian-German Panzerarmee will then have to evaluate how best to properly deploy these troops. Possibly they should be deployed in joint operations with the German Ramcke battalions.[21]

The first consequence of the decision to cancel the Malta operation was that the *Folgore* was reassigned to a less glamorous task; the second, which became clear only one month later, was that it was destined to be used as a light infantry unit on the El Alamein Front. This decision was seen by many at the time as truly baffling, since the paratroopers were just as unsuited for the desert war as the standard infantry divisions. They not only lacked transports, which were essential in North Africa, but they also did not have the firepower (anti-tank guns and field guns) to withstand enemy armored attacks. The decision appears even more troubling today, as it has since been ascertained that the Italian Army had at least three other divisions at its disposal in the summer of 1942: the *La Spezia*, the partially motorized *Livorno* and the fully motorized *Superga* were available (and would have been a better fit for the North Africa campaign).

The paratroopers were sent to Africa without heavy anti-tank guns and with few transport vehicles (a limited number of lorries that could only transport five percent of the soldiers of the division); initially, they had to scurry to find basic equipment for their specific deployment. This decision taken by the Italian military regarding the *Folgore's* deployment shows all the shortcomings that Italian soldiers had to contend with during World War Two. The military not only lacked adequate weapons, but its leaders also lacked any strategic vision. It also reveals some serious strategic and tactical deficiencies amongst the members of the German High Command. As a result of the huge losses suffered by the German paratroopers during Operation 'Mercury', the German High Command – by Hitler's plodding – had downgraded these troops to standard infantry deployments. In fact, German paras were no longer deployed in major airborne operations for the duration of the war. Instead, they were primarily utilized as elite infantry units in charge of defending key strategic positions.

Why Malta was spared

Operation 'Herkules' was canceled for the following main reasons: first, Hitler's limited interest in the Mediterranean theater meant that he neglected many of the potential operations that could have defeated the British Army in North Africa. In fact, during the course of the war, Hitler always devoted most of his attention to the conflict with the Soviet Union and preferred – in most cases – to reinforce the German Army on its ideological war on the Russian Front at the expense of the *Afrika Korps*. As a result, as Barr asserts with reference to the North African campaign: '… a low

21 Ufficio Storico, *Seconda Controffensiva Italiano-Tedesca in Africa Settentrionale da El Alghelia a El Alamein: gennaio-settembre 1942* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1951), p.390.

priority was accorded to the theater by the German High Command…'[22] Hitler's and the German High Command's lack of interest in the North African campaign was ultimately detrimental to the Axis war effort. If in early 1942, for example, Rommel's *Panzerarmee Afrika* had been reinforced accordingly with just a few more motorized units, it could have possibly gained a decisive victory in the desert; for example, if Hitler had dispatched to North Africa in 1942 the motorized troops that were sent to fight in Tunisia a year later, the Axis could have possibly obtained a key victory prior to American involvement. Moreover, the decision to cancel the assault on Malta constituted one of the gravest strategic errors made by the Axis during the North Africa campaign. As Malta began to recover in late 1942 from the Axis onslaught, the latter began a downward spiral, which ultimately led to defeat in Tunisia and in the Mediterranean Sea.

Second, Hitler also feared that the invasion of Malta would cost too many lives, as McNab asserts: '… the airborne invasion of Crete was one of the most spectacular and audacious events of the war, but it was also extremely costly…'[23] It is estimated that Germany lost approximately 7,000 soldiers – the majority of which were paratroopers – and 350 planes during the Crete airborne attack. Hitler estimated that the Malta operation would yield even more casualties than Operation 'Mercury' and that the island could only be taken at a prohibitive cost.

Third, Greene and Massignani also mention that: 'Hitler had little confidence in the Italian Navy and feared it would let his airborne troops down, and it has been argued that his heart was never really in the plan'.[24] Hitler was particularly concerned that the Royal Navy would interfere with the Axis naval convoys transporting the seaborne units to Malta. Specifically, he feared that a significant portion of the seaborne units would never have reached their destination – thus leaving the airborne troops that had already landed on Malta in a very difficult predicament.

Fourth, Hitler's decision-making was also influenced by Rommel's great successes in North Africa between 1941-42, which had been achieved with relatively few German resources. When after the capture of Tobruk, Rommel asked permission to advance into Egypt at the expense of the takeover of Malta, Hitler was hard-pressed not to go against the advice of one of his most successful commanders. In addition, Rommel's charismatic personality helped to carry the day, since he was ultimately successful in swaying both Hitler and Mussolini on the necessity of continuing the pursuit of the British Eighth Army. Rommel was a bold and capable leader, but perhaps he had too much influence over both Axis leaders during the summer of 1942. As a result, the *Panzerarmee Afrika's* major supply issues at El Alamein were underestimated and other strategies – such as a phased withdrawal to Libya in order to better prepare for the British offensive – were too easily cast aside. Ultimately, Rommel blamed the Italians for the lack of fuel and supplies which plagued the *Panzerarmee* at El Alamein. In reality, Rommel had been the one that had argued for continuing the advance into Egypt without first eliminating the threat that Malta posed to the survival of his army.

Fifth, the Italian *Comando Supremo* showed a general lack of initiative in commencing the Malta operation. Its sluggish approach toward the operation meant that the Italian Army could not seize the initiative when the time was ripe for an invasion of Malta in 1940, or in early or mid-1942.

In mid-1942, a convergence of factors had made the invasion of Malta more feasible. The combined Italian-German air campaign against Malta's anti-aircraft units had taken its toll on the island defenses. The naval blockade by the *Regia Marina* had also created vast difficulties for both the British garrison and the native population. In mid-1942, for example, Malta faced its gravest food supply crisis. Moreover, the spectacular raid by the *Decima Flottiglia Mas*, which damaged

22 Niall Barr, 'Rommel in the Desert, 1942' in Ian Beckett (ed.), *Rommel Reconsidered* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2013), pp.109-110.
23 Chris McNab, *Hitler's Eagles, 1933-45* (Botley: Osprey, 2001), p.353.
24 Greene and Massignani, *The Naval War*, p.230.

two Royal Navy battleships in the harbor of Alexandria with manned torpedoes, had shifted the balance of power in the Mediterranean. This operation, which resulted in the incapacitation of the HMS *Valiant* and HMS *Queen Elisabeth* for over a year, allowed the Italians to gain (temporarily) the upper hand in the supply battle, as the Royal Navy no longer had a full fleet in the Mediterranean to block the naval convoys. All of these factors point to the fact that in mid-1942, the Axis had achieved naval superiority in the Mediterranean Sea and their forces were in a position to wrest the initiative away from the Royal Navy and its main operational bases. The Royal Navy's weakness would have also boded well for a successful seaborne assault against Malta.

In a post-war detailed study on *Operazione* C3, Mariano reiterates that the Axis forces earmarked for the Malta invasion trained extensively for more than six months. He also points out that in the summer of 1942, both German and Italian generals – including Kesselring – maintained that the soldiers were fully prepared for the operation; but the lack of initiative showed by the Italians – in part, due to the lack of decisiveness by Cavallero – as well as German ambivalence between January and June 1942, delayed the invasion plans. The numerous requests by the Italian High Command for more German assistance also contributed to the many delays that eventually brought about the final cancellation of the operation.[25]

Finally, the Italian *Comando Supremo* also failed in outlining the grave supply issues that Rommel's *Panzerarmee Afrika* would have experienced by staying for many months at El Alamein. The British forces, for example, were less than 100 miles from their main bases in Egypt, while the Italian and German units were hunkered down in defensive positions that were more than 1,000 miles away from their supply deposits. During June 1942, when the Axis took all the important decisions regarding the North African campaign, the *Comando Supremo* should have been more forceful in arguing on behalf of the takeover of Malta, or on behalf of the politically unpopular phased withdrawal by the *Panzerarmee Afrika* from El Alamein. At the very least, it should have argued that Rommel's supply expectations were not reasonable.

ORDER OF BATTLE FOR THE AIRBORNE COMPONENT OPERATION AGAINST MALTA, JUNE 1942

General Major Student
XI *Fliegerkorps*

General Petersen	General Frattini	General Pizzolato
7 *Flieger*	*Divisione Folgore*	*Divisione* 80 *Aerotrasportabile La Spezia*

Final considerations

Finally, if the invasion of Malta had taken place in mid-1942, would it have been successful? What would have been the major difficulties facing the paratroopers? The airborne component of the operation would have been led by Major General Student and his top-rate 7th *Fallschirmjäger* Division, which had a played a vital role in all prior German parachute missions during the course of the war – thus, the *Folgore* would have fought under the command of one of the most experienced German generals and alongside the best German paratroopers. All of this experience would

25 Gabriele Mariano, *Operazione C3: Malta* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1965).

have been desperately needed, since the operation would have been no cakewalk. At any rate, what would have been the major obstacles to the airborne component of the plan?

1 The element of surprise was essential to the overall success of the airborne operation, but knowing what we know now – essentially that the British, with Operation 'Ultra', had cracked German Intelligence communication codes – it can be argued that the Allies would have had ample warnings regarding the timing of the Axis-planned invasion of Malta. It is likely that the airborne units *en route* to Malta would have faced a fully activated and battle-ready British garrison and that the Royal Air Force would have heavily interfered with their operation. It is also likely that the seaborne forces would also have been harassed by the Royal Navy during the early stages of the operation, and thus the paratroopers would have been forced to fight alone on Malta (probably longer than originally expected). The British would have also tried to prevent the airborne forces from landing into Malta by deploying all of their available weapons, such as the anti-aircraft guns, automatic weapons, mortars and artillery guns.
2 In early 1942, despite the Axis aerial campaign, Malta still had a formidable anti-aircraft defense, with 112 heavy anti-aircraft guns and 118 medium and light anti-aircraft guns, and 75 Hurricanes. The island also had an advanced radar equipment base to monitor against possible attacks.[26] As Attard argues, in mid-1942 the British garrison on Malta (after having survived the massive Axis air onslaught) still had a sufficient number of anti-aircraft batteries, Hurricanes and Spitfires to intercept Axis transport planes – thus preventing many of the paratroopers from landing.[27] Just to give an example of its relative effectiveness, Malta's anti-aircraft screen was able to shoot down a record of 114 Axis aircraft in October 1942[28] – thus it can be argued that the success of the airborne operation would have depended on the accuracy of the Axis aerial bombardment, which in turn, would have hinged upon spot-on air reconnaissance and, ultimately, upon the airborne vanguard units' ability to knock down Malta's main aerial defenses in a timely manner.
3 The main mission of the paratroopers was to secure and hold the airfield. The latter first had to be taken and then defended at all costs from likely British attempts to regain its possession. This would have involved defending the base from a larger British infantry force (and would have likely involved heavy losses).
4 While holding the airfield, the paratroopers would likely have come under the fire of Malta's artillery units, which would have also caused additional casualties.

The overall question would have been whether the paratroopers could have held the airfield for enough time to allow the *La Spezia* infantry units to land safely on the ground. If this goal had been achieved, it is likely the operation would have succeeded. With the *La Spezia* safely on the ground, the Axis forces would have had a considerable share of its forces on the island – enough, at least, to face the initial enemy onslaught. Statistics also point in favor of the Axis, as only a few airborne operations did not succeed during the course of World War Two, as Joseph asserts: '… had Operation Herkules been allowed to proceed as intended, in July 1942, it probably would have succeeded, despite the allies' intelligence edge, because the British were too low on men and equipment. The island's 25,000 defenders would have nonetheless cost the Axis invaders dear, just as Hitler anticipated…'[29]

26 Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), p.127.
27 Joseph Attard, *The Battle of Malta* (London: Kimber, 1980), p.195.
28 Jackson, *The British Empire*, p.129.
29 Frank Joseph, *Mussolini's War: Fascist Italy's Military Struggles from Africa and Western Europe to the Mediterranean and Soviet Union 1935-45* (Solihull: Helion & Company Limited, 2010), p.222.

3

Major Operations Prior to El Alamein

***RAMCKE* BRIGADE AND *FOLGORE* DIVISION COMPARISON: FORCES IN EGYPT, SUMMER 1942**

Ramcke Parachute Brigade
- -four infantry battalions
- -2nd *Fallschirmjäger* Artillery Battalion of twelve 75mm mountain guns
- -Anti-Tank Company of twelve 37mm guns

Folgore Parachute Division
- -186th Infantry Regiment (three battalions)
- -187th Infantry Regiment (three battalions)
- -185th Artillery Regiment
  - -I Battalion of 47/32 guns (72 anti-tank guns)
  - -II Battalion of 47/32 guns (72 anti-tank guns)
  - -VIII Demolition Engineers Battalion

The Battle of Alam Halfa: the six days' race

During August 1942, the *Afrika Korps* commander – Erwin Rommel – was in the midst of planning a broad Axis offensive, which later became known as 'the Battle of Alam Halfa'. Prior to Alam Halfa, Rommel had already undertaken a number of major operations – and the *Armata corazzata italo-tedesca* (or *Panzerarmee Afrika*) had pushed the British and the Commonwealth Allies (Australian, New Zealand, South African and Indian troops) back into Egypt. By the end of June 1942 (buoyed by the capture of Tobruk), Rommel's forces appeared to be on their way to capture the British base of Alexandria and the Suez Canal, while the British Eighth Army – commanded by General Claude Auchinleck – had been forced to retreat to the strategic position on the El Alamein line. The British had wisely dug in at El Alamein, where the battlefield narrowed between the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the Qattara Depression to the south.[1] As a result, Rommel could no longer advance on such a narrow strip of land by outflanking the British Eighth Army – as he had done before on several occasions – and was forced to attack by way of a more conventional frontal assault. Such an attack would pit his forces against the British defensive wall, which was comprised of armored units and large artillery guns.

1 Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (London: William Kimber, 1960).

During the First Battle of El Alamein on 1 July 1942, Rommel had unleashed his tank units against the Eighth Army, but the latter had repulsed the attack and forced the Axis forces into a stalemate. During July-August 1942, the German commander had begun to receive various intelligence reports indicating that the British Eighth Army was gearing up for a potential major counter-offensive against the Axis forces at El Alamein. Rommel thus decided to strike first – knowing full well that not only was the British Eighth Army being reinforced with additional soldiers and weapons, but that the Americans were also believed to be planning a landing in North Africa to surround the Axis forces. Rommel's goal was to achieve a major victory prior to American involvement in the campaign. His plan was aimed at overrunning the British defensive positions at El Alamein with a massive armored attack. The tanks were supposed to pass through the minefields located north of the Qattara Depression and then advance toward the Alam Halfa Ridge. Ultimately, the tanks were to reach the coastal railway station at El Alamein to cut off the British Eighth Army from its main bases of support.

Rommel's order – issued to all Axis troops – not only made reference to the critical nature of the Alam Halfa battle, but also to the key contribution expected from the newly-deployed paratrooper units: "Soldiers! Today, *Panzerarmee Afrika* – reinforced by new divisions – moves out to attack the enemy and eliminate him once and for all. I expect that every soldier of this army gives his all during these decisive days."

The Battle of Alam Halfa was the *Folgore's* baptism of fire in the North Africa campaign. As part of this operation, paratrooper units had to cover the left flank of the armored thrust – in co-operation with other infantry units – in order to:

1 Penetrate the enemy's minefields
2 Eliminate enemy artillery units to facilitate the armored advance
3 Secure a fixed flank position

Their aim was to occupy the Deir el Angar, Deep Well and Deir Alinda Ridges – thus creating a strategic bridgehead within the British defenses. While the bulk of the Axis tanks were beginning to move forward both to the north and south of Ruweisat Ridge, at 2200 on the night of 29 August 1942, three infantry columns began their outflanking maneuver. The first column – comprising elements of the *Brescia* Infantry Division, German *Ramcke* Brigade units and IX and X *Folgore* Battalions (187th Regiment), and the III Artillery Battalion (185th *Folgore* Regiment) – were set to occupy Post 101 on the Deir Alinda Ridge. The second attack column – composed of elements of the *Brescia* Infantry Division and the V and VII *Folgore* Battalions (186th Regiment) – were tasked with advancing on Deir Alinda as well from its northern flank. The third column, with the II *Folgore* Battalion (186th Regiment) and *bersaglieri* units from the XXVIII Battalion, were to advance on Qaret el Himeimat from its southern flank. The latter position was considered by the Axis Command to be of strategic importance – being a hill standing 216 meters above sea level 'that gave a commanding view over a large expanse of surrounding desert'.[2] If successful, the infantry advance would have enabled the Axis forces to create a wedge between the positions defended by the 5th New Zealand Brigade – between the Ruweisat and Alam Nayil Ridges – and those of the 2nd Battalion of the Rifle Brigade and the 7th Armored Division, which were located in the rear on Deir el Munassib.

2 Ronald Walker, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War: Alam Halfa and Alamein* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1967), p.87.

Folgore soldiers that have just arrived in North Africa, summer 1942; note how the soldiers are wearing the vintage Italian helmet used during the conquest of Abyssinia – and probably demonstrating that initially, the unit was not even furnished with standard helmets (possibly because of a shortage). (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Folgore officers that have just arrived in North Africa, summer 1942. In the background is a *Savoia Marchetti* SM82; the plane came in two versions: black and brown-green, and light sand camouflage. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

A *Folgore* sentry in North Africa, summer 1942.
(Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

A *Folgore* paratrooper with a captured British Universal Carrier.
(Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

The *Folgore* post-battle report stated that:

> The operation assigned to the infantry units presented several challenges since it envisioned a fairly deep penetration into the enemy defenses. Not only was the operation very dangerous since it had to be conducted during the night over unsecured territory, but also because the units had no transports and were forced to hand tow their 47/32mm guns, mortars and ammunition for more than ten miles.[3]

The main column in the center of the Axis infantry deployment was able to advance without facing much opposition – and by dawn on 30 August, it had occupied Post 101 on Deir Alinda. Its only casualties were the result of losses sustained during the night at the hands of British artillery units and rifle snipers, which harassed the advance of the infantry column. To the north, the second column encountered stronger opposition and was forced to storm a machine gun stronghold held by units of the 5th New Zealand Brigade near Alam Nayil. As a result of the resistance it encountered, it was able to reach the Deir Alinda Ridge only during the afternoon of 30 August. The II Battalion faced some limited resistance, but was also able to reach its destination (Qaret el Himeimat) by dawn on the same day.

The following recollections by Luigi Compagnoni – commander of a gun platoon of 6th Company (*Folgore* II Battalion) – deal with the last phase of the infantry advance:

> Our advance is slowed by the difficult terrain as our legs collapse knee deep into the soft sand brought down by the weight of our weapons and munitions. To make matters worse we also are forced to take turns in towing the anti-tank weapons…
>
> As we approach a hill shaped like a pyramid we come under heavy enemy fire…
>
> From the distance I can see that the enemy positions on the hill have come under fire and our vanguards have begun to engage the enemy. Our artillery has pounded the enemy positions and the bulk of our troops are advancing. My unit, a covering party, advances approximately for another 500 meters. We then position our machine guns and begin to fire in support of the infantry assault. Our objective is to concentrate our fire on a number of concealed trenches with stone sandars while the assault units storm enemy positions. At dawn we reach the summit of the hill, which has already been cleared and is now in our possession. Down below we can see our armored columns advancing surrounded by huge smoke and dust clouds. On both flanks we can observe a number of smoldering enemy tanks put out of action by our artillery or by the Ariete and Centauro Divisions.[4]

On the afternoon of 30 August, the *Folgore* had met its objectives and reported the following casualties: five officers/NCOs and 11 soldiers dead, while three officers/NCOs and six soldiers had been severely injured.

The *Folgore* was also involved in additional fighting at the tail end of the Alam Halfa operation on the evening of 30 August, as Brigadier Howard Kippenberger – commander of New Zealand 5th Brigade – launched a counter-attack in an effort to push back the Axis infantry advance, as Walker asserts: '… a request had been made by the Corps commander for 'substantial raids' to the south-west and south to harass the enemy's line of communication and to deter him from

3 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 1160/C/11: 'Relazione del Tenente Colonnello Giovanni Verando, capo di Stato Maggiore della Divisione Folgore, Relativa alla Divisione Paracadutisti Folgore ed al suo impiego sul fronte egiziano nel periodo luglio-novembre 1942', p.2.

4 Compagnoni, *Altri Tempi*, p.153.

pressing overnight closer to the defenses…'[5] The operation was commenced shortly after dusk and its substantial goal was to prevent the 187th *Folgore* Regiment from consolidating its positions on the Deir Alinda Ridge. Brigadier Kippenberger believed that the enemy had not dug in yet and was, essentially, manning unfortified positions. An infantry unit of 18th Battalion and three tanks of 'A' Squadron of the 46th Royal Tank Regiment began their advance at 1800 and reached the proximity of the *Folgore* defenses an hour later. The tanks attacked first and drove through and over the first line trenches – destroying these forward defenses. This push by the armored vehicles alerted the firing points in the vicinity, which laid down an intensive mortar barrage – pinning down the infantry, which was trailing the armor. As mortar fire continued to pour down – resulting in losses of men and materiel – the Valentine tanks began to withdraw first, and were shortly thereafter followed by the infantry units. The New Zealand official history reports that 'no prisoners were taken, but identification gathered from the dead showed the sector to be occupied by a battalion of the Folgore Parachute Division'.[6] The *Folgore* Division diary reports that it suffered 16 casualties (five officers and 11 soldiers), while inflicting 14 casualties amongst the New Zealand infantry forces.[7]

Rommel's offensive thrust at Alam Halfa ultimately was not successful – causing the depletion of both armored vehicles and fuel supplies. The tank advance had, in fact, been repulsed primarily by the British artillery, with its 57/50mm anti-tank guns, which had a devastating effect upon the German/Italian armor. This resulted in 'accurate, concentrated and continuous shelling by British artillery'.[8] Moreover, the losses from the artillery barrage were compounded by the continuous bombing raids by Royal Air Force squadrons, which also operated during the night, and by the counter-attack of British armored units.

By mid-1942, the British had gained aerial supremacy over Axis fighter squadrons that had to travel longer distances in order to put forth attacks on the El Alamein line. This supremacy would prove vital in the major battle in October 1942, as the New Zealand official history asserts that the Axis offensive had stalemated and: 'The only part of the mobile striking force to reach its dawn objective was the group from Folgore Division, which followed the wake of the Reconnaissance Group to occupy Qaret el Himeimat without much trouble'[9] – thus as Alam Halfa came to an end, so did the *Folgore's* first major operation in the North African Desert, which had been completed with relatively minor losses.

On 1 September, the *Panzerarmee Afrika* commander (given that the advance had faltered and the tanks had been unable to break through and reach Alexandria) withdrew his troops – thus putting an end to operations; however, both the *Folgore* and *Brescia* Divisions were ordered to consolidate their hold upon the advanced positions – thus by 2 September, the 187th Regiment was deployed on Deir Alinda and the 186th on Qaret el Himeimat, while the bulk of 185th was positioned in the immediate rear of these frontline positions as artillery support.

Patrols

Even though between the Battle of Alam Halfa and the decisive Battle of El Alamein the campaign came to a standstill, as no major offensive operation was carried out, the lull in the fighting prompted both armies to increase the number of night patrols in no man's land. As a result, during the night, the Egyptian Desert became the site for reconnaissance missions, raids and rapid

5 Walker, *Official History*, p.102.
6 Ibid., p.102.
7 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 1160/C/11: Verando, p.7.
8 Ronald Lewin, *The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 1977), p.156.
9 Walker, *Official History*, p.101.

Italian troops from the *San Marco* marine unit in Tobruk. During 13-14 September 1942, the San *Marco* fought to repel the British Special Forces' raid on Tobruk that aimed to destroy Rommel's *Panzerarmee* supply depot. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

exchanges of fire between the belligerents. The main purpose for these types of small-scale operations was to gather information on the enemy's defenses, such as where was the enemy laying new minefields? Where were the enemy trenches located? What type of troops manned these positions? Had the enemy built new positions? What type of heavy equipment did the enemy operate in these positions? This type of information, which was usually gathered primarily through these risky night patrols, allowed the Intelligence Staff of both armies to draw a comprehensive inventory of the enemy positions in preparation of future offensive operations.

A secondary related purpose of night patrols was to dominate no man's land by occupying it, and by preventing the opponent from building new fortifications, or extending his control over disputed frontline areas. Finally, the scale of night operations was also expanded on both sides in preparation of the great October battle. On the British side, patrol units were helpful in planning for the attack, as they allowed for the identification of new minefields; the probing of the defensive solidity of the Axis fortified positions; and also to gain some strategic foothold into the Axis defensive line. For the Axis forces, patrols were useful primarily to gain information about the enemy and its troop movement/deployment in the build-up to the major offensive. As Lucas Phillips asserts, the *Folgore* paratroopers were very good 'at night work'[10] – meaning that they were often deployed to patrol the front line at El Alamein on behalf of the Axis.

10 Cecil Ernest Lucas Phillips, *Alamein* (Boston: Little Brown, 1962), p.49.

On the British side, patrols led by New Zealanders or Australians often produced outstanding results, given the fierce and courageous nature of their units. The Maori fighters, in particular, were very agile in laying ambushes and killing their opponents with knives or bayonets, and were particularly feared by the Axis forces manning their defenses during the night. The Maori would raid enemy lines with regularity and would also often clash with enemy patrols. Both units of the *Folgore* and the *Ramcke* Brigade took part in several small-unit operations throughout August, September and October in 1942 – and the following actions are amongst the most memorable.

On the night of 7 August 1942, a *Folgore* platoon took part with German soldiers from the *Kampfgruppe* '*Menton*' in an operation to capture enemy soldiers near Hill 99 on the Deir Alinda Ridge. This Axis patrol unit was comprised of 30 soldiers – and on that night, it was under the command of a veteran German officer. At approximately 0100, it crossed no man's land undisturbed and made its way silently toward the edge of the enemy's barbed wire. The latter was then cut with wire cutters, and as soon as an opening was made in the wire, the unit began rushing into the enemy's trenches. The men of the patrol unit then leaped into a stronghold and stormed an unspecified number of New Zealand infantrymen, which were caught completely by surprise. The whole operation was conducted in such a short time that the enemy unit was unable to put up any resistance, and some of its men were captured, along with their weapons; however, as the Axis unit had advanced probably too rapidly – and most importantly, deeply into the Commonwealth defensive stronghold – it was, eventually, surrounded and trapped by a number of armored Bren carriers as it was retreating back to its line. As the New Zealanders opened fire – killing two Germans and two Italians – the Axis platoon lost its composure and was, by then, on the verge of being overrun. Chaos ensued amongst its ranks, as not only did the Commonwealth forces continue to pour fire – thus pinning the remaining members of the unit down to the ground – but also because the platoon commander had been seriously injured. It was at this crucial juncture of the night operation that Sergeant Major Mario Giaretto of the *Folgore's* 186th Regiment – the second-in-command – assumed control of the unit. He immediately ordered it to retreat – thus allowing his men to fight their way clear, while he single-handedly held the enemy in check with his *Beretta* machine gun. After a prolonged exchange of fire, he was first wounded and finally cut down by the enemy, but in the meantime, his platoon had been able to escape capture. His body was later found riddled by bullets and surrounded by several dead enemy soldiers. Sergeant Major Giaretto was one of the first paratroopers to be awarded a gold medal for military valor, with the following motivation: '… showed undaunted courage and a high spirit of comradeship…'[11] The operation resulted in the capture of four vehicles (Bren carriers) and three prisoners. It also claimed some casualties (two New Zealand officers and 12 soldiers), while the Axis lost eight soldiers and had four of its men severely injured.

Another notable patrol action conducted by elements of the *Folgore* on the El Alemein Front was vividly described by an eyewitness, Major Paolo Caccia Dominioni, whose XXXI *Guastatori* Battalion fought alongside the paratroopers in 1942. Caccia Dominioni's account describes how another joint Axis patrol unit went out in the middle of the night to reconnaissance the enemy's defenses, and eventually stumbled into a new minefield. Although this patrol unit did not engage the enemy, its two *Folgore* paratroopers were instrumental in saving the life of the German commanding officer after he had been injured by bumping into an anti-personnel mine. His injuries were so severe that his comrades, while quickly retreating, had left him behind.

11 Quirinale: Medaglie d'oro < http://www.quirinale.it/elementi/DettaglioOnorificenze.aspx?decorato=45485> (accessed 2 May 2014).

Here is how Caccia Dominioni recalled what happened on that night:

> The Lieutenant, the Sergeant Major and eight paratroopers, six German, two Italians, slipped out into the night and silently began threading their way in a single file along the safety track, marked out by the usual telegraph wire. Clouds cut off all light from the moon…. They reached enemy territory, and the men fanned out; the technique of desert reconnaissance was not so different from that of a destroyer's sweep at sea.
>
> Suddenly the darkness was rent by the vivid flash of an explosion. The Lieutenant had fallen. Clearly there was a new string of anti-personnel mines which had not existed the previous night. At this point the inexorable logic of the German military mind took over, and the Sergeant Major, who had assumed command, decided that the discovery of the new mine defenses completed the patrol's mission. The loss of the officer was indeed tragic, but further lives must not be risked in an effort to recover his body, and after a few minutes of absolute silence, to make sure that no British patrols were in the vicinity, the patrol made for home. They saluted and went off towards their own unit: in a few minutes' time they would be able to lie down and sleep.
>
> But after a few paces they stopped. The Italian military logic began to function. No, they decided, that the German Lieutenant must be brought back, dead or alive; if the enemy were already there, having been alerted by the explosion, then it would be a question of doing what was necessary, with rifles and hand grenades. And if the German's pride should be deflated a little by the result of the venture, no harm would be done. Fifty minutes later a poor shattered creature, which the doctors might yet restore to life, was handed over to Hubner's Battalion. No light burden it had been in that treacherous flour-like sand.
>
> We Italians are accustomed to doing things this way, the exhausted Botturini explained to the astonished Germans. He went on to report that the anti-personnel mines had been laid in great numbers in the area were the incident had taken place. All of the trip variety: whoever went back there had better watch his step. The two paratroopers were rudely shaken up out of their first sleep; nor was there time for righteous if strong-worded indignation. Quick; Quick! The Germans wanted the two Italian paratroopers. General Ramcke himself, the Brigade Commander, a small, exuberant, ever-smiling man, was visiting Hubner's Battalion. With very little ceremony he pinned the Iron Cross to the shirts of the two Italians.[12]

An ambitious plan to raid the enemy's defenses began to take shape after successive paratrooper night patrols had uncovered newly established, well camouflaged and advanced enemy positions near Deir el Munassib. During the preceding two nights, a number of paratroopers had taken turns during the night in manning a concealed foxhole that had been dug in no man's land at a distance of approximately 40 yards from the enemy's positions. Their purpose had been to observe the enemy's movements from these slit trenches, as well as to identify the most viable route around the anti-personnel mines in order to conduct a raid to take out a new Bren gun emplacement.

On the night of 3 October 1942, Sergeant Bruno Bean hand-picked five men for this small-scale – but dangerous – operation aimed at capturing enemy soldiers and destroying their firing point. After a brief pep talk, where the sergeant laid out the objectives of the raid, one by one the men were ordered to crawl from their trenches into the foxhole. From this concealed position, they made their way into the minefield, while trying to avoid coming into contact with enemy sentries or patrols. At 0130, they arrived undisturbed at the outer edge of the enemy's barbed wire.

12 Paolo Caccia Dominioni, *Alamein 1933-1962: An Italian Story* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), pp.189-190.

Sergeant Bean then ordered his men to lay down motionless, as he observed troop movements within the enemy trench. Having determined the most propitious moment to attack at 0215, the sergeant waved his men forward and the unit went into action. It precipitously stormed an enemy firing point by submerging it with hand grenades. The operation had lasted less than five minutes, and had resulted in three enemy soldiers dead and the capture of a fourth one. The surprise had been complete, and the enemy didn't have a chance to respond, as the Bren gun unit failed to fire a single shot. The small raiding party was able to make its way back successfully into the Axis trenches without having suffered any casualties.

On 8 October 1942, it was the machine gunners' turn to rejoice when they managed to shoot down two Allied fighter aircraft. For several days, Royal Air Force fighter squadrons had been strafing the *Folgore* positions throughout the El Alamein line in order to soften up its major strongholds. The combination of bombs and machine gun fire from low-flying aircraft had claimed several casualties – including a number of officers. The paratroopers had a particularly difficult time against enemy aircraft, since they were not equipped with anti-aircraft artillery units, and could only fire against bomber and fighter planes with the rather antiquated *Breda* model 37 guns. After several days of fighting these enemy aircraft incursions – by placing the machine guns in the anti-aircraft mode – on 9 October 1942, the *Comando Supremo* daily war bulletin reported that: 'A British Hurricane aircraft was shot down yesterday by an infantry unit of the Folgore Division manning automatic machine guns. The pilot, a South African, was later captured. Another British aircraft was also shot down by the same unit in the proximity of Him Himat'.[13]

Another relevant night patrol was carried out in midst of the El Alamein battle. After three days of heavy fighting, the British Army – with its tanks and artillery – had degraded considerably the *Folgore's* defenses in the southern sector, but had been unable to obtain an all-conclusive breakthrough. On the night of 26 October 1942, after repeated attempts to breach the firing points had been thrown back, a number of *Folgore* patrols were sent out to contrast potential incursions by British sapper units aimed at opening up more gaps in the minefields. At approximately 2100, an Italian sentry facing the Deir el Munassib Depression reported sighting British sappers advancing under the cover of darkness. Corporal Dario Ponzecchi, an infantryman of the 185th Regiment – along with the other members of his small unit – entered the minefield in order to intercept them. It was pitch black and the enemy's smokescreens further reduced his visibility. The corporal proceeded carefully through the minefield – trying to avoid coming into contact with an anti-personnel mine or an unexploded device, but all of a sudden, he fell into an ambush. Despite being surrounded by an enemy raiding party, he nevertheless hurled himself at them – engaging in hand-to-hand combat. During the course of the melee, he shouted out loudly to his comrades to open fire. A machine gunner from his patrol unit, from a distance, opened fire and cut down Ponzecchi and his attackers. Corporal Ponzecchi had sacrificed his life to preserve the security of the minefield.

Operation 'Beresford': The Battle of Deir Alinda

Operation 'Beresford' was launched on the night of 3 September 1942 as the Axis armor – having been stalemated by British guns at Alam Halfa – began to retreat. The aim of Eighth Army commander General Bernard Montgomery was to harass enemy troops – especially the *Panzer* units, as they pulled back; to test the Axis defensive solidity; and occupy advanced positions in the Munassib Depression, which were believed to be held only by a few Axis patrol units. The positions would later become platforms from which the British would launch attacks against the

13 Ufficio Storico, *Bollettini di Guerra del Comando Supremo, 1940-1943* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1973), p.451.

Axis forces. The operation took place in the so-called 'New Zealand box' – the sector of the front line held by General Bernard Freyberg's 5th and 6th Infantry Brigades. When the plan of attack was originally drafted, the latter had initially expressed strong reservations to his superior – 13th Army Corps commander Brian Horrocks – regarding the potential for success. There were doubts regarding the relatively small size of the attacking units, which were supposed to advance on an arc of more than 10 miles to assail the enemy. There was also a problem regarding the composition of the force, since the 132nd Brigade, which had been assigned a central role by Horrocks in Operation 'Beresford', 'was going into its first battle'.[14] Despite Freyberg's continued reservations, General Montgomery would have none of it – refusing to cancel the operation. As a result, final plans were firmed up at 13th Army Corps Headquarters on the morning of 3 September 1942 for a three-pronged attack: first, the main thrust was to be provided by the 132nd Brigade; its 4th and 5th Battalions of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment and 'A' Squadron of the 46th Royal Tank Regiment – comprised of 15 Valentine tanks – were to make a major advance in the center by capturing the positions held by 187th *Folgore* Regiment on Deir Alinda. In support of this deployment, 2nd Battalion of the Royal East Kent Regiment ('the Buffs') was to advance and consolidate the attack once a breakthrough had been achieved. On the right flank, the 26th Battalion of 6th New Zealand Brigade was called upon to carry out the second major thrust of the night. This unit would siege the positions held by 19th Italian Infantry (*Brescia*) Division on Deir el Angar and push them off from their defensive strongholds. Some units of the battalion were also required to provide support on the right flank to the troops destined to make the thrust on Deir Alinda. On both flanks of these two main assault columns, a number of raiding parties were to provide diversionary attacks in order to destabilize the Axis defenses and pin the enemy troops down. On the right flank, the 18th and 25th Battalions of 6th New Zealand Brigade were to raid the positions held by the *Brescia* Division on Deir el Angar in support of the 26th Battalion's main thrust, while on the left flank, the Maori and the 21st Battalions of 5th New Zealand Brigade – supported by 'B' Squadron of 50th Royal Tank Regiment – were expected to raid the positions held by the 65th Infantry and the German 90th Light Divisions on Deir el Munassib Ridge.

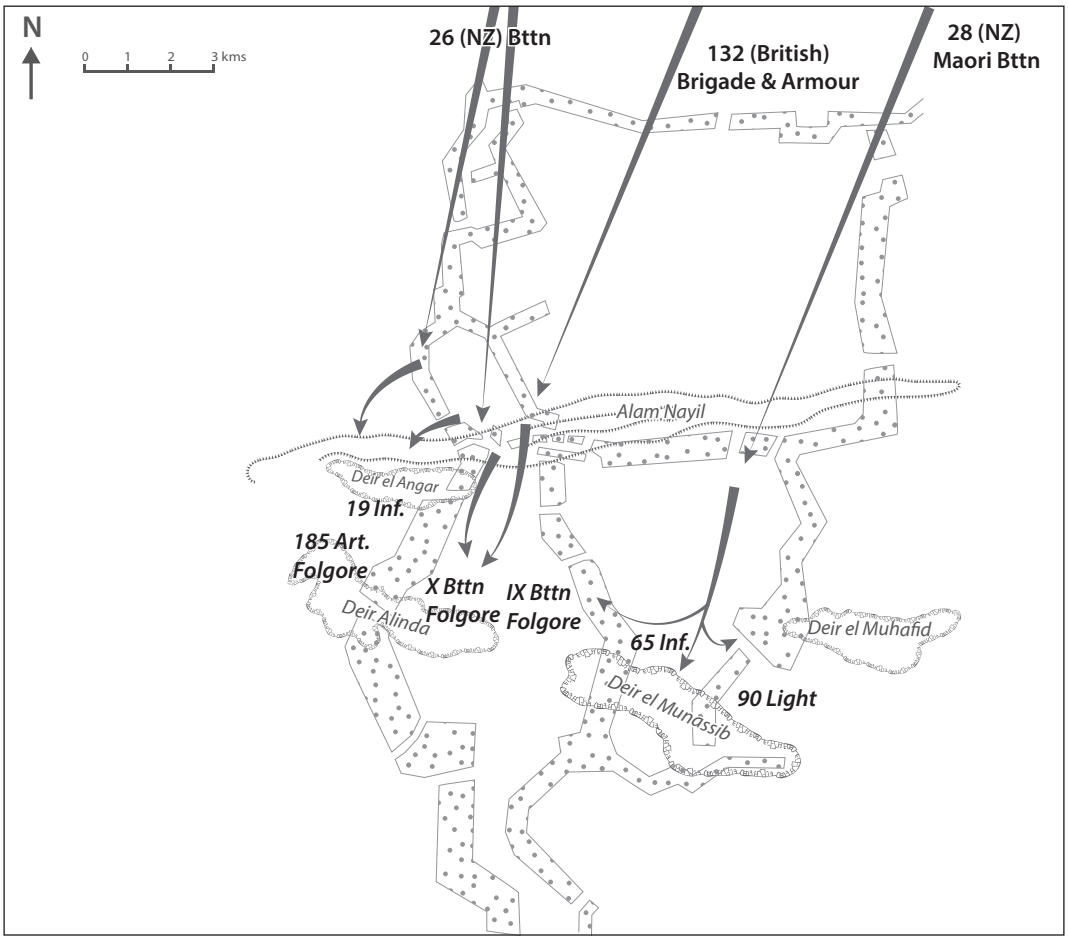
Although the final plan envisioned a set-piece operation by numerous infantry units, it was determined that there would not be a preparatory artillery barrage in order to facilitate a surprise attack:

> All the units involved in the attack had to make gaps in the 600 yard wide minefield that covered the Southern Front of the New Zealand box. The attack was to be 'silent' in the hopes of passing the assaulting infantry and their supporting arms through the minefield gaps before the German and Italian infantry known to be in the Munassib Depression were alerted of the impending attack.[15]

Altogether, the operation involved approximately a force of approximately 4,000 infantrymen and up to 200 vehicles – including Bren carriers and armored units.

During the night, units of 6th New Zealand Brigade struck first by besieging the positions on Deir el Angar held by the Italian 19th Infantry Division. A 10-minute, surprise, swift artillery barrage preceded the main infantry attack. At 2100, while the troops of the 25th Battalion were held in check by heavy mortar fire, the 18th Battalion was able to advance deeply into the positions of the Italian infantry and wedge itself in-between the strongholds of two enemy battalions. From this advanced platform, it then proceeded to raid a number of Axis infantry firing points

14 Niall Barr, *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein* (New York: Overlook Press, 2005), p.241.
15 Ibid., p.242.



Map 3.1 Operation 'Beresford', 3-4 September 1942: This map shows the direction of attack of the Commonwealth forces (mainly the 26th and 28th New Zealand Battalions, and the troops of 132nd Brigade) against the positions on Deir Alinda held by the *Folgore* Division's X and IX Battalions. The counter-attack by the Commonwealth forces had been ordered directly by General Montgomery. (Redrawn by George Anderson based upon the following original source: Mario Montanari, *Le Operazioni in Africa Settentrionale, v. 3* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1990))

by bayonet-charging numerous machine gun strongpoints, as 'a melee of hand to hand fighting developed'.[16] While the New Zealand unit lost three of its officers and suffered 50 casualties in a wild fight, it nevertheless overcame the enemy's opposition by inflicting grave casualties and taking some prisoners. Most importantly, it succeeded in tying down enemy units while the main attack was underway – thus by 2145, 18th Battalion's diversionary raid had been completed, with the unit achieving its goal. Ten minutes later, its units retreated toward their defensive line.

In the meantime – by 2130 – the 26th Battalion was rapidly advancing toward the Deir el Angar area, with its infantry assault units in the forefront, followed by a number of armored vehicles armed with Vickers guns. The infantry advanced behind a barrage provided by these guns that was

16 Walker, *Official History*, p.132.

meant to keep the enemy's forward-positioned infantry tied down inside the dugouts and trenches – thus preventing it from interfering with the advance of the assault units. Once in close proximity to the enemy lines, the armored vehicles and the tanks were to crush enemy defenses, protect the infantry and, perhaps most importantly, shake the resolve of the Axis defenders.

As the supporting raid by 18th Battalion had successfully diverted the enemy's attention away from the main sector on which the 26th Battalion was operating, the latter was able to advance (for the most part) undisturbed by enemy fire, and to ultimately occupy the ground close to the positions held by the *Folgore's* X Battalion on Deir Alinda.

Its 'C' Company, commanded by Captain Hall, was the first to advance toward the enemy and to come to blows with the paras of the 30th Company on the western edge of the Deir el Alinda salient. Covered by the heavy fire provided by the 5th Brigade's Vickers guns, the infantry attack progressed well and eventually broke through a number of enemy forward firing points:

> "New Zealand infantry units," recalled Lieutenant Domenico Longo, "surprised us and rushed our defenses. Within a few seconds they were upon us. I saw Sergeant Major Cogoini falling to the ground after being bayoneted to the chest. I witnessed as another platoon leader, Sergeant Giovannini, was brought down by enemy fire. Then I heard some screams followed by the crackle of machine gun fire. At that point a number of our sentries jumped out and started back toward our main position to spread the alarm. I then found myself face to face with an enemy fighter as he grabbed me and pushed me to the ground."[17]

Struck hard by the bold attack, several forward firing points were overwhelmed and silenced by the speed and mobility of the New Zealanders, which succeeded in taking out several machine guns, automatics and rifle units.

Sergeant Enzo Giacchiero, 30th Company's commander, also recalls those hectic initial moments:

> Lieutenant Dezza, commander of 6th Battery Unit, was sitting next to me when the assault commenced. All of a sudden we were faced with this unexpected attack on our positions. Both Dezza and I immediately alerted our anti-tank gun unit and ordered it to start shooting immediately. Soon after Dezza's piece scored its first hit of the night when it pierced an armored vehicle causing a huge blaze. The fire lit up the battlefield in front of our position and I spotted more than 200 enemy troops in the distance which were in the process of assaulting us with bayonets. Slightly behind this assault unit a number of armored vehicles were also driving straight at us while firing their machine guns. Unfortunately in these initial stages most of our crew served weapons, given the commotion, were not deployed in time and as a result a fierce hand to hand combat battle ensued.[18]

The first instances of the battle saw rapid exchanges of fire, followed by hand-to-hand combat with bayonets and hand grenades, as the defenders fought back to prevent the New Zealanders from submerging additional strongpoints. As the enemy was pressing hard against a number of firing points, the X Battalion commander – Amleto Carugno – ordered a counter-attack. This counter-thrust – executed with the aid of hand grenades and light machine guns – resulted in temporarily halting the advance, as some positions were reconquered, but at a steep price. In fact, more than

17 David Zambon, 'Operation Beresford, Les Parachutistes Italiens de la division Folgore dans le combats de Deir Alinda', *Ligne de Front*, N. 20, 2009, p.68.

18 Ibid., p.68.

10 men had fallen during the counter – including the commander himself. As soon as the most advanced enemy assault units were pushed back, and the servers of the *Folgore* artillery and anti-tank units were in a position to operate their weapons, a hail of fire enveloped the main elements of the 26th Battalion, which were still in the process of negotiating their way past the minefield. A particularly high number of mortar bombs landed near the 26th Battalion Headquarters Group – killing four men (including the unit's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Peart) and wounding several others.

By this time, however, Captain's Hall 'C' Company had resumed its speedy advance by slipping by and outflanking the enemy well beyond its forward firing points. In a swift maneuver, it swung to the rear of a *Folgore* machine gun strongpoint and proceeded to attack it with hand grenades. Despite facing some initial difficulties, it ultimately overcame its resistance in a wild fight, which caused more than 30 casualties – killed mostly by bayonet blows and hand grenades. As the unit refused to stop by dawn, it had completely lost its way by marching much further than originally anticipated into the enemy's defenses. As a result, it had been cut off from the bulk of its battalion and was forced to dig in and take up positions to the rear of the two *Folgore* battalions. Occupying highly exposed and unfortified positions, the unit began to take casualties from mortar rounds, as other units of the *Folgore* were gearing up for the counter-attack. When the New Zealanders returned fire, heavy machine gun fire penetrated their positions – wounding and killing several soldiers. During this prolonged exchange of fire, a mortar shell severely injured the unit's commander, Captain Hall. When the mortar barrage was halted, this unit, which had already been severely weakened by mortar shells and machine gun fire, was then attacked from two different sides. The first attack was conducted by units of the *Folgore*, while the second one by elements of the *Ramcke* Brigade. Practically surrounded by the paratroopers, which were quickly closing in on its position – and with little or no ammunition left – 'C' Company was forced to surrender.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the British deployment at approximately 2200, the two Royal West Kent Battalions crossed the minefield separating their trenches from the Italian defenses and then began their approach toward the northern edge of Deir Alinda. They were followed by a caravan of more than 40 vehicles – transporting the battalion's anti-tank gun, machine gun and Royal Engineers platoons, and 15 Valentine tanks. Their effort would result in the major thrust of Operation 'Beresford': a frontal attack to envelop and destroy fortified positions on the Deir Alinda Ridge, with a final progression to the northern ridge of Deir el Munassib. On the Deir Alinda Ridge, the Italian strongholds were manned by the 1,000 strong contingent, which was comprised of the IX and X Battalions of 187th *Folgore* Regiment. 'The regimental companies', according to the commander of the 187th Regiment – Luigi Camosso – 'were deployed in numerous non-communicating firing points. Our rather thinly-occupied defensive positions were spread out over a wide section of the front line. The ranks had been depleted by losses sustained during Alam Halfa and by dysentery'.[19] The IX Battalion was situated on the right of the Deir Alinda Ridge, while the X was on the left. The positions to the right of the Deir Alinda Ridge – on Deir el Angar – were the mostly heavily fortified within the Axis southern sector deployment, as units of the *Brescia* Division had begun to reinforce them since the first night of the Alam Halfa offensive. In contrast, the positions held by the *Folgore* and the *Ramcke* Brigade were the least fortified, since both units had only occupied them for two days. As a result – at the time of the British attack – much of the defensive work, such as the digging of gun pits, slit trenches, machine gun emplacements and anti-tank ditches, was still in progress.

19 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 15B: Luigi Camosso Comandante del 187 Reggimento Paracadutisti Folgore, 'Relazione del 187 Reggimento Paracadutisti Folgore sui combattimenti in Africa Settentrionale'.

The dead are collected and buried in the *Folgore* frontline sector after the Battle of Deir Alinda / Operation 'Beresford', 3-4 September 1942. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

An Italian anti-tank position in North Africa; the artillery unit is a 75/27mm model 06. Many Italian artillery pieces deployed in North Africa came from captured Austro-Hungarian artillery batteries during the Great War. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

An Italian *bersaglieri* strongpoint in North Africa, with a 47/32 anti-tank gun. The '*bersaglieri*' (or 'sharpshooters') wore distinctive black uniforms with brimmed hats – trailing cock's feathers. They were known for their strong physical endurance and their marksmanship. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

A paratroop assault engineer of the *Folgore* Division wearing a 'Samurai suit', which was used to carry demolition charges and related equipment. *Bangalore* torpedoes were some of the heavy weapons available to the assault engineers. (Unknown, but most likely Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Under cover of darkness, vanguards of the Royal West Kent were able to approach the positions held by the *Folgore* without being noticed by the sentries on duty. At approximately 2300, these advanced patrol units sprang a surprise attack on the Italian defenses, as Baldassare Giubilaro – an officer of the IX Battalion – recalled:

> It was dark and I was able to recognize the enemy only when its assault units rushed our positions. I first yelled out to them to identify themselves, but they kept advancing. All of a sudden a rocket flare was launched by us to illuminate the area in front of our position. I could then clearly see that they were enemy soldiers after having recognized the conical shape of the distinctive British helmets. It was too late however, since to the right of my firing point, one of our Breda gun emplacements was quickly overwhelmed and all of its servers killed by bayonet blows within just a few minutes.[20]

Then, from different directions, more Royal West Kent troops rushed to silence the anti-tank gun platoon of the 26th Company by firing automatic weapons and throwing hand grenades. They quickly overran the position – killing its eight defenders, which were taken completely by surprise. The raid into these forward firing points had already caused several casualties and had deeply unsettled the Italian defenses. The confusion in their ranks had been increased by the well-concealed and timed infantry attack, but also by the fact that the paras had probably initially mistook these British units to be German sappers. In fact, the Italian units in the Deir Alinda and Alam Nayil sectors had earlier been notified that during the night, a unit of German sappers would begin laying a new section of the minefield in the proximity of their positions. The paras had, most likely, been caught off-guard by elements of the first wave of attack, which had yelled out in Italian: "*Camerati non sparare!*" ("Comrades don't shoot!") while trying to infiltrate themselves into their defenses.

The initial disorientation was also caused by the thick smokescreens used by the British artillery to conceal the movements of their infantry units. Needless to say, it caused some confusion – especially during the early stages of the battle – thus favoring the swift British sally. By the time the vanguards of the Royal West Kent had overrun the forward positions, the *Folgore* anti-tank guns and mortar units were called into action, as the screams and explosions had, by then, alerted the entire strongpoint. The anti-tank guns immediately opened a furious fire on the advancing enemy columns – destroying a few Bren carriers, which exploded and produced huge blazes. The smoldering vehicles lit up the advancing infantry columns – thus facilitating the response of the artillery pieces of 185th Regiment, which by then, had also joined in the action by shelling the attacking units. As Turner asserts, the Axis response was facilitated by the fact 'that some soft-skinned vehicles which had been brought forward too early, contrary to the New Zealanders' advice, were set alight providing illumination for the benefit of the defenders, and the advance was halted well short of its objectives'.[21]

As the bulk of the British infantry units were within 300 yards of the Deir Alinda Ridge, 'heavy fire from all types of weapons crashed into their close packed columns'.[22] According to the 187th Regiment war diary, 'the heavy artillery guns intervened in the fight and their fire was directed against the rear of the infantry assault in order to sever the former from the armored vehicles which were moving decisively towards our positions'.[23] Seeing the enemy tanks in the distance advancing

20 Zambon, 'Operation Beresford', p.69.
21 Adrian Turner, *Eighth Army's Greatest Victories* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 1999), p.76.
22 Walker, *Official History*, p.142.
23 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 15B: Camosso.

at high speed, the heavy guns crews initially held their weapons in check. It was only when a number of Valentines came within 350 yards of their positions that the defenders opened fire with all their weapons. The first Valentine to cross the defensive perimeter was shot at by four anti-tank grenades – fired in rapid succession. While the first three shots failed to reach the target, the fourth and final shot perforated the vehicle – setting it on fire. The huge blazes lit up the surrounding area, and with much-improved visibility, three additional vehicles were shot to pieces by the anti-tank guns. This protracted artillery shelling allowed the *Folgore* units in the forward positions to regroup and prepare for a counter-attack. By then, approximately 200 British infantrymen had created a small bridgehead on the ridge by infiltrating themselves in-between the firing points held by the 25th and 26th Company. As the bulk of the enemy infantry was immobilized in no man's land by the intense barrage of the machine guns – and the artillery guns – the paras began to confront the bulge that had materialized in their defenses. Small assault groups were quickly formed up and swiftly succeeded in enveloping the enemy troops: 'After the British assault units had been thrown into disorder, one company from each of our battalion leaped to the counterattack inflicting serious losses on our adversary and also capturing its raiding units on the ridge'.[24] The counter-attack – undertaken primarily with hand grenades and rifle fire – exacted a heavy toll upon the attackers, which were also invested by heavy defensive machine gun fire. As the British infantry units recoiled from the first counter-attack, they quickly re-organized their ranks and then attempted to put forth a second attack. By this time, however, the paratroopers – reinforced by a small reserve unit – had gone on their second counter-attack of the night, as fierce hand-to-hand combat broke out. After heavy fighting, the British infantry units were pushed back, while being driven out of the majority of the firing points that they had managed to capture.

Once these forward positions had been cleared, Major Aurelio Rossi – the commander of the IX Battalion – attempted to re-establish communications between his units by sending out dispatch runners to the main firing points. While some reported back that the firing points they had reached were still fully operational, some detailed that the enemy had managed to overrun several machine gun pits. After the dispatch runners had completed their task – and the command center had gained a more complete understanding of the extent of the enemy's penetration – the defenders began to co-ordinate the counter-battery fire of the anti-gun and mortar units, but as soon as the unit had begun to regroup, a large grenade landed on the command post of the IX Battalion, which killed Major Rossi on the spot. This produced further uncertainty in the defenders' ranks, which had been left leaderless.

The following is the recollection of a machine gunner holding a defiled machine gun position at the Battle of Raffaele Doronzo:

> Two armored vehicles followed by an infantry platoon had spotted my machine gun outpost and began moving with haste toward my position. They then started shooting at me from a distance of approximately 100 meters but most of their bullets bounced off my fortified position. It was nighttime and I was unable to aim with precision. I resorted to shooting instinctively at the approaching infantrymen by firing close to the ground. I went through a number of ammunition clips forcing the enemy soldiers to throw themselves to the ground in order to avoid my bullets. We exchanged fire for over half an hour but then the assault began to die down. Although I remained vigilant the whole night, the fighting in my sector was over before dawn.[25]

24 Ibid.

25 Raffaele Doronzo, *Folgore! … e si moriva: Diario di un paracadutista* (Milan: Mursia, 1978), p.46.

While the main British assault had succeeded in initially overrunning some of the strongpoints, it eventually fell prey to the rapid fire of the anti-tank guns and the machine guns, and the infantry counter-thrust. Throughout the barrage, the 132nd Brigade Headquarters, which had been trailing the bulk of the assaulting units, was pinned down to the ground and had been precluded from directing operations. It was only after Brigadier Robertson began to survey the remnants of his scattered troops on top of an armored vehicle that he realized that the attack had faltered. Both of his Royal West Kent Battalions were being subjected to a heavy pounding and could not advance any further, while the support columns were still too far away from the bulk of the action. When Robertson was severely injured by a mortar explosion and forced to leave the battlefield, the assaulting infantry units began to waiver and started to pull back. Unlike the more experienced New Zealanders, the infantrymen of the 132nd Brigade had left their shovels on the vehicles which were advancing, with the tanks behind the infantry units. Had these troops not done so, they could have probably been able to dig in while the enemy barrage was in full swing – thus avoiding unnecessary casualties.

Major T.H. Bevan of the 4th New Zealand Field Regiment detailed when his unit came under heavy enemy fire:

> The area was promptly plastered with everything the enemy had, mortars and 75s, and before the column could break up there were several more trucks blazing, including a couple loaded with mines which went up like atom bombs….
>
> We were under intense m.g. and s.a. fire and the tracer was coming through them and over our heads…. We stayed on the ridge all night being mortared and shelled all the time. Every time another truck went up in flames, we moved just far enough to get out of the worst of the light. This was fairly frequently and there were not many trucks left by morning. The situation in front was very obscure. Brigade had no communication with any of its three battalions, no phone, no wireless, no runners, until after dawn. The Brigade wireless trucks were not hit and they must have been in touch with New Zealand Division all the time. I was in touch with my battery and regiment throughout.[26]

The Valentines of 'A' Squadron (46 Royal Tank Regiment) – trailing the infantry battalions – were also to experience heavy fighting. As they approached the *Folgore's* positions, they were shelled by both mortar and gun fire. Approximately nine out of 15 vehicles were put out of action either by the anti-tank guns, or by stumbling into mines. The surviving crew members and their vehicles initially dug in and began to deploy their weapons, but they too were later forced to retreat under a torrent of fire.

At approximately 0400, as news from the battlefield revealed that the attack had faltered, General Freyberg ordered a general pull-back of his infantry units and the armor. While the bulk of the British Royal West Kent forces had initiated their pull-back, the raiding party of the 28th Battalion – which had not heeded the pull-back order – continued to harass Axis firing points and defenses. This battalion, comprised primarily by very tough Maori fighters, fought on uninterruptedly for more than eight hours; in fact, throughout the night on the left flank, these forces had caused numerous casualties amongst the Axis troops. Their operation had initially begun at 2200, as the units of the 5th New Zealand Brigade sub-divided into four columns, with the Maori 28th Battalion and the 21st Battalion up-front, followed by the 22nd Battalion and the armored vehicles unit – advancing for more than an hour without encountering enemy opposition. A while later, the Maori Battalion was the first unit to engage the enemy, as it overwhelmed a group of

26 Walker, *Official History*, p.143.

German sappers (900 Battalion), while the Valentines of the 50th Royal Tanks – by mistake – entered into a minefield situated in front of the German 90th Light Division defenses, where they sustained heavy casualties. The Maori Battalion continued to harass Axis defenses, as it veered to its right, and then charged against the positions held on Deir el Muhafid by one of the battalions of the *Ramcke* Brigade and by the 1st Company of the 65th Infantry *Trieste* Division. In the fighting that ensued, the Maoris inflicted heavy casualties upon the Italians – proving once again that they were excellent troops and gifted with great speed and agility. It is estimated that their raid killed or wounded 140 soldiers and destroyed 13 vehicles.[27]

This unit then continued to advance west until it reached a number of firing points of the IX *Folgore* Battalion at approximately 0430 on 4 September. The initial impact, with the 27th Company in particular, was very fierce. Giovanni Bertazzoni, an infantryman of that unit, recalls:

> During the night one of the sentries Ugo Maraschi came into my foxhole to verify whether my machine gun was still functioning. As he jumped inside my hole and began to talk to me he was struck by a bayonet blow to his back. A few seconds later he was also shot. Then an enemy infantryman, a large, bulky Maori fighter, tried to hit me with the butt of his rifle but I shot him first.[28]

A number of other firing points were also attacked and sustained casualties by the fierce assault of the Maoris, but since the unit had been on high alert, as enemy units were still retreating, it swept the ground with machine gun fire – thus halting the advance of the Maori units as well. After the Maoris had retreated, both *Folgore* battalions sent out patrol units to collect the injured; to take possession of enemy weapons and equipment that had been left behind in the battlefield; and to restore some of the forward positions and firing points. It was during this closing phase of Operation 'Beresford' that Brigadier George Herbert Clifton was captured – along with a major, a number of vehicles from his headquarters and many weapons. As a number of local counter-attacks were launched (starting at 0430), one of them engaged scattered units of the New Zealanders' 26th Battalion – driving them back under a heavy mortar and anti-gun screen. During the retreat, Brigadier Clifton and his staff were in a Jeep – driving around in order to locate those units from the 6th Brigade (especially 'C' Company of the 26th Battalion, that had failed to return to the New Zealand box). Brigadier Clifton ordered his driver – by mistake – to reach a checkpoint manned by soldiers in camouflage uniforms, only to find out that they were not British, but were, in fact, enemy soldiers.

Post-war, many contrasting accounts of his capture were produced – some of which distort completely what really happened.[29] On Clifton's capture, the most reliable account appears in the official history of the New Zealand military:

> Just prior to dawn, Brigadier Clifton set off from the box to visit 26th Battalion and from there was directed on to 132nd Brigade headquarters. Returning to give 26th Battalion instructions for providing extra cover for the Southern Front, he took Major Walden in his jeep to reconnoitre the front, and particularly C Company. Seeing some khaki-clad troops above ground off to the south, Clifton told his driver to make for them, only to discover the

27 Mario Montanari, *Le Operazioni in Africa Settentrionale*, *vol. 3* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1985), p.606.
28 Zambon, 'Operation Beresford', p.69.
29 Samuel W. Mitcham Jr., *Rommel's Desert War: The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps* (Mechanisburg: Stackpole Books, 2007).

> troops were Italian parachutists of the Folgore division. The two officers, the driver, and the wireless operator were all taken prisoner and with them the enemy collected a number of documents and marked maps. The latter's value was lessened by the action of the driver who, when he realized capture was imminent, did his best to obliterate the cinagraph markings on the talc overlay of the brigadier's situation map. The operator, attempting a last minute call, had his set smashed by a rifle butt. The only witness to this capture on the New Zealand side was an artillery observation officer, who saw the jeep surrounded by troops but did not realize who the occupants were.[30]

Thus, Operation 'Beresford' came to a halt during the early morning of 4 September. Both sides had suffered grave casualties, but the offensive did not yield any tangible gains. 'The attempt', according to the British official history of the war, 'to close the minefield gaps had therefore failed. It had caused the enemy no more than passing concern, a disappointing result in view of the high casualties, the New Zealanders having lost 275 officers and men and 132nd Brigade, whose first battle it was, 697 killed, wounded and missing'.[31] The West Kent official history, with regards to Operation 'Beresford', states that 'the operation will remain as a ghastly memory for the survivors'.[32]

On the Axis side, both the *Brescia* and the *Folgore's* 187th Regiment suffered the largest share of the casualties. The latter's war diary records the following losses: 16 officers and 182 soldiers dead, and seven officers and 38 soldiers wounded. The X Battalion had taken the brunt of the British attack and suffered such a heavy toll that a few days later, it was merged into the IX Battalion. The *Folgore* also reported that it had captured 270 soldiers, 18 anti-tank guns, five Jeeps, eight armored vehicles and four Bren carriers, as well as knocking out 20 Valentines and other armored vehicles.[33]

With regards to the performance of the *Folgore's* units involved in Operation 'Beresford', we can make the following considerations: first, the paratroopers came into conflict with very experienced (with the exception of 132nd Brigade) and solid Commonwealth units that tested their mettle. Following the initial disorientation caused by the sudden incursions of numerous raiding parties attacking under the cover of darkness, both battalions eventually recovered their defensive composure and were able to put down heavy machine gun and mortar fire to repulse the attack. The start of the battle was characterized by the quickness with which the New Zealand and British assault units charged the forward firing points. During those early exchanges of fire, both *Folgore* battalions were put under further pressure by the fact that they were left leaderless, as they lost both commanders – Major Rossi of the IX and Captain Carugno of the X – as well as the 187th Regiment's commander, Camosso, who was severely injured. Facing a similar situation, less experienced and resolute standard infantry units might have buckled under the weight of the attack, but despite the early losses, the defensive formations were able to re-organize and prevent their strongholds from being overrun.

Another factor that facilitated their defensive effort was a different predisposition toward heavy armor. In contrast to the standard Italian infantry approach, that maintained that tanks had to be fired upon before they had entered the defensive perimeter, the paratroopers were instructed differently: their approach was predicated on trying to disaggregate the enemy's armor from its infantry units by letting the former pass through the forward firing points. The paras would then deal primarily with the infantry assault units with flanking machine gun fire, while the armor was

30 Walker, *Official History*, p.147.
31 Ian Stanley Ord Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East: British Fortunes Reach Their Lowest Ebb, v. 3* (London: HMSO, 1960), p.389.
32 Harold Chaplin, *The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment, 1920-1950* (London: Michael Joseph, 1954) p.127.
33 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 15B: Camosso.

General Erwin Rommel tours *Folgore* defenses in North Africa in the summer of 1942; the photo was probably taken after the Battle of Alam Halfa in early September 1942. A diary entry of one of the *Folgore* soldiers present states that Rommel was in a very bad mood on that day, since that same morning, while being driven to the front line, his vehicle was strafed by Royal Air Force fighter planes. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

targeted by forward-positioned anti-tank weapons. The latter, by the fact that they were positioned at close range of the enemy's attacking columns, concentrated their fire upon the tanks, as well as against concentrations of enemy infantry. This approach resulted in putting out of action a number of Valentines and several of the brigade's mobile units during Operation 'Beresford'. The forceful response of the Axis units, which resulted in splitting up and isolating the assault units from their armored support, was also recognized by New Zealand's official history. The latter, with reference to Operation 'Beresford', stated that its execution pointed to 'the complete lack of co-operation between the armor and other arms and the futility of tank operations without infantry support'.[34]

Second, the *Folgore* proved that lightly armed (anti-tank weapons) infantry units could successfully resist the advance of British armor, although in the case of Operation 'Beresford' it faced the lighter, more vulnerable tanks. During the operation, the paratroopers had deployed primarily the 47/32mm anti-tank guns, 81mm mortars, machine guns and hand grenades to fight off the armored attack. They managed to knock out of action 20 armored vehicles – including 10 Valentine tanks, despite inferior equipment – by positioning their anti-tank guns in forward firing points. The guns were used to immobilize the tanks, while tank-hunter platoons seized upon the immobilized tanks after the fight was over to finally put them out of action with Molotov cocktails. The latter were used in this procedure due to the ineffectiveness of the anti-tank guns in

34 Walker, *Official History*, p.149.

Italian infantrymen advancing in North Africa.
(Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Another photograph of Italian infantrymen advancing in North Africa.
(Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

piercing and destroying the enemy tanks with a single or a few shots; at best, the 47/32mm gun was able to immobilize enemy armor. To finally finish off the tank, the small infantry platoons would then have to burn it with incendiary devices or flamethrowers – prior to it being towed out of the battlefield by the enemy.

Another difference between the standard infantry battalions and the paratroopers was the latter's good positioning and use of the machine guns. The *Ramcke* Brigade, for example, did not have to make recourse to tank-hunter platoons, as it had plenty of viable larger sized, anti-tank guns. It was constituted on four infantry battalions, an artillery battalion, an anti-tank unit and a sapper company. The anti-tank unit was armed primarily with *Flak* 88mm guns, which were the most effective anti-tank gun of the whole North African campaign.

Third, camouflaged and defiladed machine gun strongpoints, for example, raked large portions of the enemy's most forward companies – inflicting losses especially against the 132nd Brigade. The strong and effective machine gun fire then allowed the paras to push the Commonwealth forces off from the frontline positions that they had originally been able to infiltrate.

Finally, the *Folgore* was recognized for the first time in the X Army Corps war bulletin for its contribution in shoring up the war-weary and under-strength Italian infantry divisions. Just by being deployed alongside motivated and well-trained units such as the *Folgore* and the *Ramcke* Brigade, the common infantry units fought more effectively.

Operation 'Braganza': The Battle of Deir el Munassib

COUNTER-ATTACKS BY ITALIAN INFANTRY

The inferiority of the Italian to the German Army is apt to obscure certain Italian qualities which it would be unwise to ignore. Among these is the skill and promptitude of Italian small-scale counter-attacks from prepared positions. During the Battle of Keren in Eritrea, for example, the Italians, through this tactic, succeeded more than once in dislodging the British from newly taken positions.

Since many junior Italian officers have not been sufficiently trained, these counter-attacks do not always materialize. But, whenever the junior officer happens to be well trained and keen, he may prove to be a formidable opponent, and preparation to meet such action should be taken whenever fighting against the Italians.

In this type of operation, the excellent Italian 81-mm mortar [see *Tactical and Technical Trends*, no. 11, p.44] plays an important role. It is significant that the 81-mm mortar allowance of the Italian infantry division in Italy has recently been increased from 24 mortars to 36, and to 45 in the latest type of motorized division. However, it remains at 18 in the North African theater.

Since July 1942, there have been three separate occasions when Italian resistance in Egypt has been an unpleasant surprise. In all of these, they were dug in and deployed in very favorable positions. At least once the 81-mm mortar was identified, and caused considerable damage.

[The above United States Intelligence Report on Italian infantry tactics was originally published in *Tactical and Technical Trends*, no. 14, 17 December 1942.]

During the first part of September 1942, there was a lull in the fighting, as the Axis forces were strengthening and hardening their defenses for the coming blow by the British Eighth Army. On 29 September, the 44th (Home Counties) Division launched a limited operation to capture the Deir el Munassib Depression, which was the advanced key defensive position that the Axis had held since the Battle of Alam Halfa.[35] The Deir el Munassib salient consisted of three small hills, which were named by the Italians as 'Hill 92-94', 'Hill 97' and 'Hill 101'. The latter was the most strategic position and its peak was a round, but rugged, relief – and an excellent artillery and observation post. These three positions were held by 500 *Folgore* paratroopers of the IX Battalion (Captain Pasquale Chieppa) and they were deployed in a diamond-like formation.

According to the battalion commander:

> The defensive fortifications were sited on top of the ridge. There were three strongholds, each of which had a number of lateral rather than frontal embrasures. This allowed each stronghold to direct their machine gun fire toward the flanks. In this way each stronghold could mutually support the others. There were also a number of concealed dugouts or foxholes situated outside of the perimeter of each stronghold. These were manned by small teams of two or maximum three soldiers which were trained to intervene in the fighting only once the enemy had advanced beyond them.[36]

These defenses were complemented by extensive barbed wire works, anti-tank ditches and two minefields. The strongholds' defense was hinged upon the well-concealed anti-tank guns, mortar and machine gun units, and each weapon was positioned into dug-in gun pits. The weapon emplacements were widely dispersed so that they offered as little of a target as possible for enemy aircraft and tank units. Each weapon was also covered with a net or a small tent, which was camouflaged with sand-like color paint. Some of the weapons were also painted over with a sand-like color.

Each company manned one of the three strongholds, while a smaller fortification to the rear hosted the battalion's headquarters – thus, the 25th Company held the most advanced position (Hill 92-94), which was situated just north of the central position, while to the north of this stronghold, there were two additional positions held by the *Ramcke* Brigade. The 27th Company held the rear position of Hill 101, which also included the battalion's headquarters, while the 26th Company held the southern stronghold on Hill 99. To the south of this position, along rugged terrain, there were a number of defensive positions held by units of the *Brescia* Infantry Division. The field deployment was, in turn, supported by the unit's own anti-tank weapons, as well as by heavier 75mm artillery guns. The *Folgore's* anti-tank guns, mortar units and machine guns were positioned primarily in the forward firing points. The anti-tank guns, in particular, were typically placed as close as possible to the front line in order to be properly deployed against enemy tanks. The 75mm artillery guns, to be used primarily to shell enemy infantry concentrations and tanks, were located in more secure positions in the rear. In total, the IX Battalion could count on three 81mm mortars, four 47/32mm anti-tank guns and nine machine guns. In addition, it could also count upon 11 British mortars, 10 guns, 20 Bren guns and four Bren carriers, which had been captured during Operation 'Beresford'. These weapons, however, could only be utilized for a limited amount of time, or until the limited stock of ammunition ran out.

35 Bryn Hammond, *El Alamein: The Battle That Turned The Tide of The Second World War* (Botley: Osprey, 2012), p.188.

36 Renato Migliavacca, *La Folgore nella Battaglia di El Alamein* (Milan: Edizioni Auriga, 2002), p.5.

On 29 September, General Federico Ferrari Orsi – commander of the X Army Corps, while touring the *Folgore's* defenses on Deir el Munassib – had grudgingly allowed the IX Battalion commander to adopt a new tactical procedure. This procedure entailed a more offensive-minded set of strongpoints that were well camouflaged, but were also much more forward-positioned than usual. Based on this spider web-like forward-positioned set of defenses, the battalion would initially let the enemy advance into its defensive positions – literally allowing the opponent to submerge the strongpoints – and then all of a sudden, open fire at point-blank range with mortars and machine guns. If the paratroopers had successfully entrapped and stopped their opponents, they would then seize the initiative with a counter-attack from different directions to break the impetus of the enemy attack. This procedure required all of the units of the battalion to be highly disciplined by holding their fire until the enemy had advanced well into their positions. Each unit, from the company stronghold to the small infantry platoon in the foxhole, had to operate cohesively, as the element of surprise would not be achieved if units failed to heed the commander's orders by firing their weapons prematurely. With the 75mm artillery guns and the mortars, the unit also had at its disposal considerable firepower. The artillery would also be required to hold its fire until the commander had ordered to unleash the guns by launching a colored flare.

The defensive tactical procedure adopted by the *Folgore* during Operation 'Braganza' was later summarized in a directive issued by the Italian High Command of North Africa in 1943. The document, which was meant to provide guidelines for anti-tank defense to standard infantry units, stated that:

> The infantry battalion's defenses shall be deployed upon three strongholds, two at the front, one at the rear of the main position.
>
> Each stronghold shall be surrounded by a number of small dugouts. These positions should be deep enough to protect small groups of soldiers from an enemy aerial attack or from machine gun fire. In addition, if these dugouts are well concealed, the enemy tank crews while advancing will not be able to spot its in-occupants. During an enemy attack it is imperative to separate the tanks from the mass of the infantry units. The defenders shall allow the tanks to proceed past their position, while the machine guns and the anti-tank guns, situated in the main strongholds, shall focus their fixed line of fire upon the infantry. Once the tanks have passed over the advanced firing points, the infantry shall leap out of their dugouts and concentrate fire against enemy infantry units that are advancing behind the tanks. The enemy armor shall then be dealt with by the artillery units situated to the rear of the main stronghold.[37]

The British had taken numerous days to prepare for the operation codenamed 'Braganza'. Various reconnaissance missions – including aerial ones – had resulted in the identification of the Axis key defensive fortifications, as well as in determining the numerical consistency of its troops. As a result of these scouting missions, the British had determined that the enemy had fortified Hill 101 and Hill 92-94, while the northern section of the depression was believed to be unoccupied. Moreover, the British estimated that the positions were held by under-strength infantry troops of the *Trieste* Infantry Division, which had suffered heavy casualties during the Battle of Alam Halfa.

British soldier Jack York – of the 5th Battalion of the Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment – recalled that:

37 di Giovanni, *I Paracadutisti*, p.131.

> The enemy had still retained their hold on part of this area after the September push, and the result was quite a large bulge in our front line. Our task was to straighten this out and rumour had it that the enemy here consisted of Italian pioneer units and second-rate troops, in which case we were told, the attack would be a piece of cake.[38]

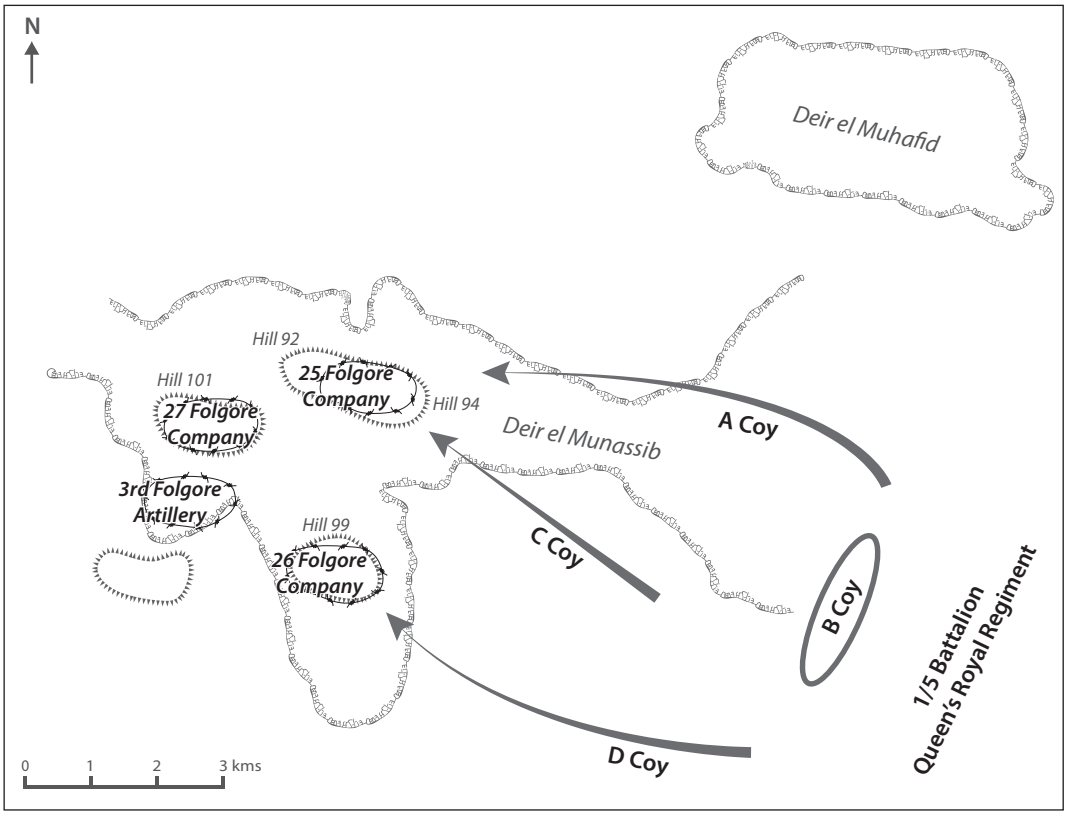
Similarly, Fred Daniels – of the same unit – also recalled that 'the company commander called a meeting of officers and NCOs during the afternoon and we learned that the job that night was likely to be no trouble at all, a bit of cake, as the army says'.[39]

The brigade had trained for five days – and on 28 September, it had even conducted a detailed dry run of the attack. The plan, which had been vigorously reviewed several times and no detail had been overlooked, aimed at recapturing an area of ground near Deir el Munassib for extra artillery deployment in anticipation of the major Eighth Army-planned offensive – codenamed Operation 'Lightfoot'. The operation involved three battalions: the 5th, 6th, and 7th of the 131st Brigade of the Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment, which was commanded by General Erich Frith and supported by a number of tanks from 4th Armored Brigade, as well as by nine artillery field regiments.

At 0415 on 30 September, the British forces began to approach on foot the enemy positions, while a violent artillery barrage – provided by the guns of nine field regiments – rained down on the Axis positions. For 20 minutes, more than 240 large and medium artillery guns concentrated their fire on the IX Battalion trenches – razing to the ground several fortified positions and destroying many of the gun pits.

The three-pronged assault was led by the 5th Queen's Battalion, which had been assigned the key role of penetrating deeply into the enemy positions to capture its two main firing points, while the 6th and 7th Battalions took control of positions previously abandoned by the enemy. The plan envisioned that the 5th Battalion's 'C' Company would execute a frontal attack against Hill 94, while 'A' Company would take Hill 92 and 'D' Company would take Hill 101 by outflanking its firing point from the south. Finally, 'B' Company had been assigned a support role, which was to consolidate the hold on Hill 101 once it had been cleared. The operation initially proceeded well, as the infantry of 5th Queen's Battalion advanced under the smoke-screen of the artillery barrage and was able to penetrate undisturbed into a number of openings through the barbed wire. 'A' Company advanced the furthest into the Italian positions and bypassed Hill 92, but while 'C' Company advanced past the minefield, the Italians fired a number of oil mortar bombs – thus illuminating the battle ground. Suddenly, 'C' Company was invested by heavy mortar and machine gun fire. Its units then attempted to charge up to Hill 94, but were met with fierce defensive fire and were, subsequently, counter-attacked by paras throwing hand grenades. 'A' Company fared even worse during the attack, since by advancing beyond Hill 92, it had progressed to the back of the *Folgore's* main firing point; then suddenly, while the bulk of 'A' Company was still moving in open ground, the defenders emerged from the darkness and put down heavy machine gun and mortar fire. The assault unit was subjected to a severe barrage from the back and from the flank, which mercilessly decimated its ranks. The few survivors were later captured.

38 Hammond, *El Alamein*, p.140.
39 Jon Latimer, *El Alamein* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p.125.



Map 3.2 Operation 'Braganza', 30 September 1942: This map shows the direction of attack of the British infantry troops of the 131st Queen's Royal Regiment against the *Folgore* positions held by the IX Battalion on Deir el Munassib. The position was of vital importance, since it controlled a large span of territory on the El Alamein line. (Redrawn by George Anderson based upon the following original source: Mario Montanari, *Le Operazioni in Africa Settentrionale, v. 3* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1990))

The following are the recollections of Ernest Norris – an NCO of 'A' Company of 5th Queen's – describing how his unit encountered fierce enemy fire:

> In a matter of seconds they were firing tracer bullets at us. It was still dark and I was aware of the tracer coming towards us they seemed too slow to be bullets. But there were men getting killed and wounded all around…. We had passed a number of enemy machine gun posts and we were being fired from behind as well as from the front and there we were literally pinned down. We could not move forwards or backwards, we were imprisoned in this little form of defence…. Being so close to the enemy we heard their voices, they came towards us knowing that we could not do anything to them. Suddenly they were standing above us shouting and ordering us by signs to take off our equipment and throw our rifles down and come out. And that is what we did.[40]

40 Ernest Norris, 'British private served with 1/5th Battalion Queen's Royal Regiment in North Africa, 1942'; Imperial War Museum: Audio Collections < http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80004599>

Captain Chieppa's recollection of the battle tells a similar story:

> When the enemy's artillery barrage ceased we saw six armored vehicles and numerous infantry units advancing toward us. We allowed these units to advance toward the barbed wire by not firing a single shot. Since on our side there had been no reaction, the enemy units passed over the wire and entered into our defensive perimeter. I would venture to say that they advanced deep into our defenses probably because they were thinking that we had abandoned our positions. Once they crossed over the barbwire, we all opened fire on them. Many of them went to ground and began firing back at us, while the armored vehicles drove toward us. One of our anti-gun units, which was positioned at a distance of approximately 200 meters from the vehicles, opened fire and immobilized two vehicles. The remaining four vehicles first attempted to bypass our stronghold and then retreated.[41]

In the meantime, 'D' Company's assault was also repulsed, with heavy casualties. The Queen's Royal Regiment's official history states that 'D' Company 'was seen going towards its objective, and some witnesses reported that they reached hill 101 but came under heavy enemy fire from a company in a reverse slope position'.[42] 'D' Company had, in effect, overrun a number of forward firing points – inflicting approximately 20 casualties amongst the defenders – but as it continued on in pursuit of its main objective (Hill 101), it was riddled by machine gun fire. Heavy fire came primarily from the firing point on Hill 92. Here, a *Breda* 37 machine gun had been positioned to face the left flank of Hill 101, with a field of fire upon the slope. The crew of this gun emplacement had observed 'D' Company's outflanking maneuver and quickly opened fire once the latter was close to reaching the top of the hill. This was followed with a counter-attack by a unit equipped with two flamethrowers and small automatics, which caused further casualties amongst the troops of 'D' Company.

The following are the recollections of Lieutenant Colonel Luigi Camosso of the 187th Regiment, whose command post was located on Hill 101:

> Our visibility was hampered by the heavy fog and the enemy's smokescreen. These conditions favored the assaulting units trying to infiltrate us and destroy our firing points. The paras, following the instructions that had been given prior to the battle, remained calm and collected and only opened fire when the enemy was at close range. The counter-attack was carried out as soon as our visibility improved. Paratroop units supported by the flanking fire from automatic weapons sallied against the enemy. Our immediate reaction surprised and overwhelmed our enemy which eventually retreated.[43]

By this time, 'B' Company had advanced to the south of Hill 101 and dug in approximately half a mile from the Italian strongpoints. Here, it waited for the signal to advance, which never came. As the counter-attack had pushed back the assault units, the heavy artillery began to shell the main access points to the plateau, as well as infantry concentrations. As a result, the bombardment began to exact a heavy toll on 'B' Company, which was pinned down to the ground.

By the end of the battle, the 5th Queen's Battalion had been decimated and two companies had been eliminated, while a third company had only 50 survivors. Italian records state that the 131st

(accessed 4 May 2014).

41 Migliavacca, *La Folgore nella*, p.7.

42 Ronald Johnson, *The Queen's in the Middle East and North Africa* (Guildford: Queen's Royal Surrey Regiment Museum, 1997), p.30.

43 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 15B: Camosso.

Brigade lost six officers and 360 soldiers (of which, 150 were taken prisoner), while the *Folgore* suffered 45 losses – including six officers (the majority of which came from the 25th and 27th Companies, which had received the brunt of the British attack). Its losses came mainly from the forward units manning the positions, which had been overrun during the first phase of the battle.

The 131st Brigade reported in the post-battle report that it had lost nine officers and 300 soldiers. General Horrocks (the commander of the 13th Army Corps) and General Hughes (the commander of the 44th Division) followed the battle as it was unfolding from the headquarters of the 131st Brigade. Even though their troops had suffered many casualties, both officers were initially intentioned on renewing the attack against the central positions on Hill 101 with troops from the 7th Queen's, but by 1930, after reviewing the casualty figures, they decided to delay the attack to the next day. On 1 October, General Horrocks decided to call it off, as the enemy was believed to be well entrenched in its position, and it was unlikely that he would be dislodged from it.

Although the fighting during Operation 'Braganza' lasted only one day, its main tactical dynamics are of significant interest in gaining a better understanding of the subject of our study. The initial barrage had been fierce and had caused some casualties amongst the ranks of the para-troopers, but as Johnson asserts: 'There is little doubt that friendly artillery fire failed to put out of action many of the mortars and machine-guns, and the enemy seems to have had plenty of time to man their positions when the barrage lifted'.[44]

It was standard practice for the paras to build well-dug-in foxholes and trenches, which were often deep enough to withstand these heavy barrages. During the barrage, the paras remained in their posts (rather than in further-away reserve caverns) and once the latter had passed over their heads, they began to fire their weapons at the most opportune time. This left the men of the Queen's Regiment in a precarious situation, as the bulk of its assault units were subjected to steady fire from well-positioned mortar and machine gun units from the onset of the battle. In addition, NCO Norris' recollections are of interest not only because they allow us to understand how the assault developed, but also because they confirm aspects of the rather unusual defensive tactical approach adopted by both German and Italian paratroops in North Africa. By initially letting their opponents advance deeply into their position – and after entangling them by machine gun fire coming from different directions – the defenders counter-attacked resolutely. The surprise attack ultimately overwhelmed the courageous, but inexperienced, units of the 131st Brigade.

The paras first based their defensive operations on well-placed machine gun and mortar units, which provided the firepower for breaking up infantry assaults. In addition, para units would try to trap their opponents by defending in-depth with a multiplicity of smaller (in-depth) scattered positions. The machine guns' nests, in particular, were kept quiet during the preliminary phases of the enemy attack. They would only be activated when the enemy units were at a close range, or even after they had bypassed some of these forward firing points. Once the enemy units had advanced into the defenses, they were met by intensive fire from all sides, as the machine guns and the rifles were called into action to repulse the attack. When the enemy columns were attacked by surprise – and at close range – its forward assault units were typically repulsed by the paratroopers. As the assault units began to waiver, the remaining forces of the battalion were harassed during the retreat by mortar and machine gun fire.

Second, the paratroopers defended their positions by resorting to deception. This included simple dugouts in the desert, which were difficult to see. Digging in weapons in well-camouflaged gun pits, which made it difficult for the enemy tank crews to locate them, was a common practice. Also, the paratroopers manning the machine guns held their fire until the enemy had advanced

44 Johnson, *The Queen's in the Middle*, p.45.

into the defensive perimeter. It was only at close range that the attacking British forces began to take notice of the concealed machine gun emplacements.

Third, Operation 'Braganza' also revealed that the para units would defend their positions by the use of multiple and frequent counter-attacks. The counter-attacks allowed the paratroopers to maintain the initiative even during a defensive battle. They were used primarily to take back lost ground and inflict heavy casualties upon their opponent. This defensive approach differed from the more linear and static defenses typically adopted by the standard Italian infantry units in North Africa; in fact, with time, the paratroopers' zonal defensive system would become the tactic adopted by the whole army.

The *Folgore's* war diary summarized the events surrounding Operation 'Braganza' as follows:

> Between 0425 and 0455 the Regiment's positions were hammered by the intensive enemy's artillery barrage. At 0455 the British assault units supported by the armor began to advance toward our positions. At the same time the British artillery put down a thick smokescreen to conceal the advance of the assault units. The paras of the 187th were not caught off guard by the barrage and patiently waited for the enemy to advance. They adopted the same tactical procedure used on 4 September when every unit opened fire against the enemy at close range. Like on 4 September the rapid reaction of the paratroopers forced the surrender of the forward assault unit while the bulk of the battalion was shelled with mortar and machine gun fire. Throughout the hasty retreat the enemy suffered heavy casualties. Our troops identified and buried 120 enemy soldiers while 280 were captured. The enemy also left behind a few armored vehicles which were destroyed by the anti-tank guns or while maneuvering through the minefield. The 187th recorded the following losses:
>
> Six officers and eighteen soldiers died, while eight officers and ten soldiers were severely injured.[45]

Hammond asserts: 'The action of the 131st Brigade at Deir el Munassib, coming as it did, in the build-up to Montgomery's major offensive, has not received much attention. It almost certainly influenced Montgomery's thinking regarding his attack plans'.[46] The surprise attack – led by qualified troops – had failed because of a lack of good intelligence, shortfalls in execution of the plan and an overall lack of co-ordination between infantry and artillery. As a result, the British Eighth Army went back to basics and the next operation ('Lightfoot') reflected a more simple, World War One-like frontal attack, with massive artillery support.

The leadership of the Axis forces came away from the battle with the belief that its troops deployed in the southern sector of the El Alamein line – mostly made up by German and Italian paratroopers – would be able to withstand the much anticipated (and major) blow from the British Eighth Army. Despite being vastly outnumbered, these elite forces had defended their positions with vigor and had successfully counter-attacked the enemy. Most importantly, their defensive efforts had been self-sufficient, since there had been no need to deploy Axis armor.

On 30 September, the German 21st *Panzer* Division had been assembled at the rear of the Italian positions – ready to intervene in case the British had achieved a breakthrough. The fact that its intervention was not necessary during the course of the battle reassured the commander of the Axis forces with regards to the battle-readiness of its newly-deployed forces. It also allowed him to preserve the tanks and armored vehicles for the coming fight with a resurgent Eighth Army.

45 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 1160/C/11: Verando.
46 Hammond, *El Alamein*, p.145.

Lastly, on that day, the commander of the *Afrika Korps* issued a bulletin which recognized the soldiers of the *Folgore*, by stating that the latter had 'bore the brunt of the attack. It fought well and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy'. A few days later, Bernhard Ramcke – the general of the German *Fallschirmjäger* Brigade in North Africa – presented the Italian paratroopers with 11 Iron Crosses.

4

Operation 'Lightfoot'

A) The balance of power

Following the failed offensive operation at Alam Halfa, the Axis forces were forced onto the defensive, while the British Eighth Army began to receive massive reinforcements – including state-of-the-art American tanks, weapons and vehicles. By October 1942, the resources available to General Bernard Montgomery were vastly superior – both in ranks and armaments – to those of the Axis. The British forces included 195,000 men, 1,000 tanks, 908 field and medium artillery pieces and 1,451 (of which, 849 were the more powerful 6 pdrs) anti-tank guns. In contrast, the Axis could count on 104,000 men, 500 tanks (of which, more than half were Italian light tanks) and 500 pieces of artillery, and approximately 400 medium anti-tank guns (of which, only 86 were *Flak* 88mm guns).[1]

In overall terms, the British – before the start of the Battle of El Alamein – enjoyed a two to one advantage in both heavy weapons and manpower. Montgomery, through the 'Ultra' intercepts, also knew that Rommel was away on sick leave and that most units of his army were under strength and short of equipment. In addition, the Axis forces – having advanced deeply into Egypt – faced a very difficult logistical situation, since their supply bases were very far from the front line. Supplies were brought in mainly by trucks, and the Axis mobile supply columns were continually under the threat of Royal Air Force aerial assaults. The British overall command of the air – dictated by numerical superiority and the closeness of the El Alamein line to the British airfields – would play a major role during the battle.

By October 1942, British troop morale was also improving as a result of several factors, including: the Eighth Army's ability to stop Rommel's advance during the First Battle of El Alamein; the arrival of new, advanced weapons and reinforcements during August and September; and the fact that infantry units were often rotated in and out of service, with a generous leave policy, and were well fed with abundant food and water provisions. On the Axis side, troop morale was mixed: on the one hand, the troops had confidence in their commanders – especially because since early 1941, the Axis forces had prevailed upon the majority of the engagements with the Eighth Army, but on the other, troop morale had been weakened by the Axis' precarious supply situation at El Alamein, which resulted in inadequate food rations and water. In addition, the vast majority of Italian infantrymen were suffering from war-weariness due to the fact that they had been fighting uninterruptedly for 30 months. Leave policy in the Italian Army was almost non-existent, since there were few reinforcements to plug under-strength frontline defenses. Their fighting quality had also suffered due to uninterrupted campaigning and the lack of heavy weapons – particularly armor and anti-tank guns. In contrast, the morale of both German and Italian paratroopers was still high, even though both the troops and their commanders were still getting accustomed

1 Ronald Lewin, *The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2003), p.164; see also Jack Greene and Alessandro Massignani, *Rommel's North Africa Campaign: September 1940-November 1942* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1999), p.218.

to their new role as light infantry, and to the logistical and supply difficulties that the desert campaign presented.

B) The British plan of attack

Montgomery's plan of attack was simple and straightforward: it was based on a frontal infantry assault – supported by a heavy artillery barrage and a massive deployment of bomber and fighter aircraft – to slowly grind down and destroy the Axis forces with the overwhelming power and resources of the Eighth Army. The operation, codenamed 'Lightfoot', consisted of a combined arms attack against two points of the Axis front on the El Alamein line. In the southern sector, the assault to be undertaken by the 13th Army Corps – comprised primarily of the 44th and 50th Infantry Divisions, the Free French Infantry Brigade and the 7th Armored Division (the so-called 'Desert Rats') – would pit these forces primarily against the *Folgore* Division's defensive strongholds. 'Lightfoot's' overall objective in the southern sector was aimed at breaching the minefields; overwhelming the Axis defensive line; and then reaching the Deir Alinda, Taqa and Gebel Kalakh Plateaus, as Crociani and Battistelli assert: '… on paper this was a realistic objective, given the forces involved and the Italians' lack of anti-tank weapons…'[2]

The British advance was to be made by a combination of arms – including special assault units, infantry and armor. The infantry, along with specialized sapper units and the field artillery, had to first clear the minefields and the anti-gun screen. Special sapper units would go in first to create a path in the minefields by decommissioning/destroying the enemy mines; then once the anti-tank guns had been dealt with, the armor would then advance, followed by more infantry. The most important factor was for the British field artillery guns and the specialized sapper units to prepare the way for the armor by softening up the anti-tank screen – thus, the field artillery had to destroy the anti-tank guns with high-explosive shells, while the sappers had to do the same with mortars and explosives. It was also hoped that British aerial supremacy would translate into bombing and strafing attacks on the enemy's batteries.

As Niall Barr correctly points out, since the *Panzerarmee Afrika* in October 1942 was heavily outnumbered in tanks and low on fuel, it was forced to base its defense on the El Alamein front line – primarily on its artillery and its anti-tank units.[3] In fact, the Axis' anti-tank guns – together with the minefield defenses – were Rommel's main defensive predispositions to face the British offensive, but while in the northern sector the Axis had assembled the vast majority of its powerful German *Flak* 88mm anti-tank guns, in the southern sector its defenses were, for the most part, based upon the less powerful and effective Italian guns, and also on defensive strongholds (which were manned almost exclusively by Italian infantry units with little or no mobile transportation).

On 23 October – the day before the start of the great battle – the artillery support in the *Folgore* Division sector included the following units:

1 Seventy 47/32mm anti-tank guns
2 Twelve 75/27mm guns
3 Twelve 100/17mm guns
4 Three 88/55mm guns provided by the *Ariete* Division
5 Four 90/53mm guns provided by the *Ariete* Division
6 Five *Flak* 88mm German guns

2 Crociani and Battistelli, *Italian Army Elite*, p.28.
3 Barr, *Pendulum of War*, p.278.

A *Folgore* strongpoint at El Alamein, with a 47/32mm anti-tank gun dug into a gun pit. The gun was comparable to the British 2 pdr in that by 1942, it was made obsolete by the 6 pdr gun. While the British Army was able to introduce into service more powerful anti-tank weapons, the Italian Army was forced to fight with the obsolete 47/32mm until the end of the war. (E.G. Vitetti)

Italian troops lay anti-tank mines in the desert; they appear to be laying TMI 35 *Tellermines*, which were manufactured by the Germans and distributed to Axis ally troops. In order for these anti-tank obstacles to be effective, they were always covered by small-arms fire. The *Folgore* Division employed a complex system of observation and defense to impede the British from clearing gaps in the minefields: the observation points were manned 24 hours per day, with at least two men on duty at all times; they were armed with rifles and machine guns, and were located both inside the minefield and along the far edges of the field. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

A *Folgore* strongpoint in North Africa in 1942; these are officers looking out into the desert – trying to spot the movements of the British units in the distance. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

An Italian strongpoint in North Africa, with the *Solothurn* anti-tank rifle. The rifle was fairly ineffective and could only pierce light armored vehicles. It was manufactured in Switzerland and was purchased by the Royal Italian Army – being subsequently named '*Fucile Anticarro S*' ('Anti-tank Gun S'). It was used as a standalone weapon by infantry in the trenches, or it was mounted on a vehicle – being largely employed during the North African campaign. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Therefore, in the south, the vast majority of the anti-tank gun emplacements were manned with the largely outdated 47/32mm gun. Up to that point in the North African campaign, there had been only a few successful precedents where lightly armed Italian infantry units had prevailed over a major British armored assault. In December 1941, during Operation 'Crusader', the Young Fascist Regiment was ordered to defend the Bir el Gobi Hill to cover the retreat of the Axis armored units. On that occasion, both the 11th Indian Brigade and the British 7th Armored Division attacked multiple times with combined armor and infantry assaults. Despite the massive British deployment, the infantrymen of the Young Fascist Regiment were able to hold the line and inflict severe casualties on the Allies – especially by knocking out several tanks. Their defensive effort was predicated exclusively upon the 47/32mm gun, hand grenades and various types of petrol-based explosive devices. On many other occasions – especially during the first year of the war – similarly-armed Italian soldiers had not been able to withstand the pressure of an armored attack, and had been forced to either surrender or retreat.

In early 1941, the Germans had enjoyed a distinctive technological edge in the desert campaign; they had better weapons and extremely capable leaders. The German battle tactics – especially the ways they used the armor and the artillery in a harmonious fashion – enabled them to achieve a massive impact in just a few months. A year later, however, the disparity between the German – and especially the Italian – anti-tank equipment and the Allied tanks had shifted the balance of power. This was the result of several factors – the most important of which was the shipment to North Africa by the Americans of heavier M3 Grant (28.5-ton) and M4 Sherman (35-ton) medium tanks. The Grant tank, for example (with its powerful 75mm gun), was a game changer for the North African campaign, even for the better-equipped German forces. The Grants were superior to any German tank – except perhaps the Mark III Specials – and were no match for the smaller Italian tanks. The Eighth Army's armored units not only enjoyed overwhelming numerical superiority over the Axis, but it also had much heavier weapons. The American Priest tank, for example (with its 105mm gun), was not only impervious to most Axis anti-tank guns, but was also a very tough match for heavier Axis divisional artillery units.

Another factor that had contributed to widening the gap between the Axis and the Allies was that the British Eighth Army was also being reinforced with newer, more powerful versions of the British Crusader and Valentine tanks, which by October 1942, were being fitted with a 6 pdr gun instead of the earlier 2 pdr version. In addition, all of the new British anti-tank guns represented a vast improvement over the weapons originally issued to the Royal Artillery and infantry at the start of the North African campaign: the Ordnance Quick-Firing 6 pdr, with its 57/50mm gun, was introduced in the spring of 1942. It had been used effectively during the Battle of Gazala, where its armor-piercing shell had been successful in penetrating both Italian and German tanks, as one Italian general observed: '… with regards to anti-tank weapons, the balance of power had definitively tilted in the Allies' favor. The latter brought into the El Alamein battle larger sized armored units such as the Pilot tank, against which, our 47/32mm gun and the Solothurn rifle had little or no effect'.[4]

Three years into the campaign, the Italian units were still armed with antiquated *Solothurn* rifles, flamethrowers and 47/32mm gun units as their main anti-tank weapons. Some of this equipment had performed satisfactorily during the first two years of the desert war, but were vastly outdated by late 1942. The 47/32mm gun, for example, had the same firepower of the British 2 pdr gun, but it was slightly less effective in piercing armor. By May 1942, the British had, by then, replaced the 2 pdr with the much more effective 6 pdr gun.

4 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 31bis: Divisione Ariete, Il comandante della divisione corazzata Ariete Francesco Arena, 'Considerazioni sull'impiego delle varie armi nella battaglia di El Alamein'.

By late 1942, in light of the relevant Allied advancements in tank technology and firepower, the anti-tank Italian gun could only immobilize heavier Allied units if it fired a number of shots in rapid succession against the tank tracks. In order to succeed, the gun had to be deployed in a close-combat position – typically within a range of 300 feet or less of the enemy tanks. In most cases, the gun only succeeded against the weak parts of the tank by firing at least 10 or more grenades. The anti-tank units would work in close collaboration with dedicated anti-tank infantry assault units, which would typically be called into action after the tank had been immobilized by the anti-tank grenades. These units would then leap out of their foxholes to put it out of service with flamethrowers, hand grenades and Molotov cocktails. Once the tank had been dealt with, the anti-tank infantry units would then attempt to capture its crew.

Although the Axis forces were, for the most part, at a disadvantage, their anti-tank effort, however, was aided at El Alamein by the following factors: first, the vast expanse of the desert landscape facilitated the anti-tank defense. With regards to the fighting in the southern sector during the Battle of El Alamein, for instance, many British infantry soldiers recollected that they never saw the enemy – given the vastness of the terrain on which they had to advance on. The typical fighting of World War One, for instance, where hand-to-hand combat between two opposing armies prevailed, was very rare in North Africa. Most infantry assaults during the desert war were executed in conjunction with armored units. Both the Germans and the British maintained that the vast majority of offensive operations were to be conducted by a combination of arms so that the enemy's defenses were invested with sufficient firepower – and by superior forces. The tanks would be responsible for providing the main offensive blow, while the infantry would be expected to roll up the enemy's fortified positions from the rear. These conditions, such as the advance by a combination of arms on the wide-open desert landscape – with few landmarks – favored dug-in defensive positions, which especially at night, were difficult to locate. In addition, if these anti-tank gun or machine gun emplacements were situated on elevated ground, such as in dug-in weapons pits on top of a ridge, they were not only difficult to locate, but also difficult to conquer, as their fixed line fire could deter enemy assault units from getting near them.

Second, most of the fighting during the Battle of El Alamein in the southern sector was conducted at night. With low visibility, it was difficult for the tank crews to locate the enemy's infantry firing points, which usually consisted of concealed foxholes in the open desert. Under these conditions, the tanks could overcome these positions primarily by smashing them or rolling over them, or by firing their machine gun rounds a few inches off the ground. Both tactics could only achieve results at very close ranges. Close-range combat, in turn, aided the Italians, as their guns could shoot at the slow-moving British tanks as they carefully made their way around the minefields during the night.

Third, the enemy's armored units had to advance past the minefields under full view of the enemy's artillery. Their advance could only proceed very slowly – giving the Axis forces the opportunity to shift resources to determined threatened areas.

C) Axis defensive deployment

On 22 October, the Axis troops were deployed as follows on the El Alamein line: the southern sector – from the Qattara Depression to the Ruweisat Ridge – was defended by the forces of the Italian X Army Corps. The *Pavia* Division occupied the southern edge (which bordered into the Qattara Depression) of the Axis defensive line. It was followed by the *Folgore*, which held the positions between Qaret el Himeimat and Deir el Munassib. The *Ramcke* Paratrooper Brigade was situated to the north of the *Folgore* and occupied the Deir Alinda Plateau with its two groups: *Hubner* and *Burckardt*. Finally, the northern edge (Tonnen Piste) of the positions – defended

by the X Army Corps – was manned by infantry units of the *Brescia* Division and by the 28th *Bersaglieri* Battalion. The center of the Axis positions – to the north of the Ruweisat Ridge – were occupied by the *Bologna* Infantry Division, while the northern tip saw the deployment of the *Trento* and the 164th Infantry Divisions. The armored forces were deployed to the immediate rear of the infantry in order to parry a potential enemy breakthrough, and also because of the low stocks of gasoline. Accordingly, Rommel's orders had been to avoid the deployment of the armor unless battle conditions had deteriorated to such an extent that armored support was necessary. The 15th *Panzer* and the *Littorio* were stationed in the north, while the 21st *Panzer* and the *Ariete* were deployed in the southern sector. The *Trieste* and the 90th Light Divisions were also deployed in the rear as additional mobile support units.

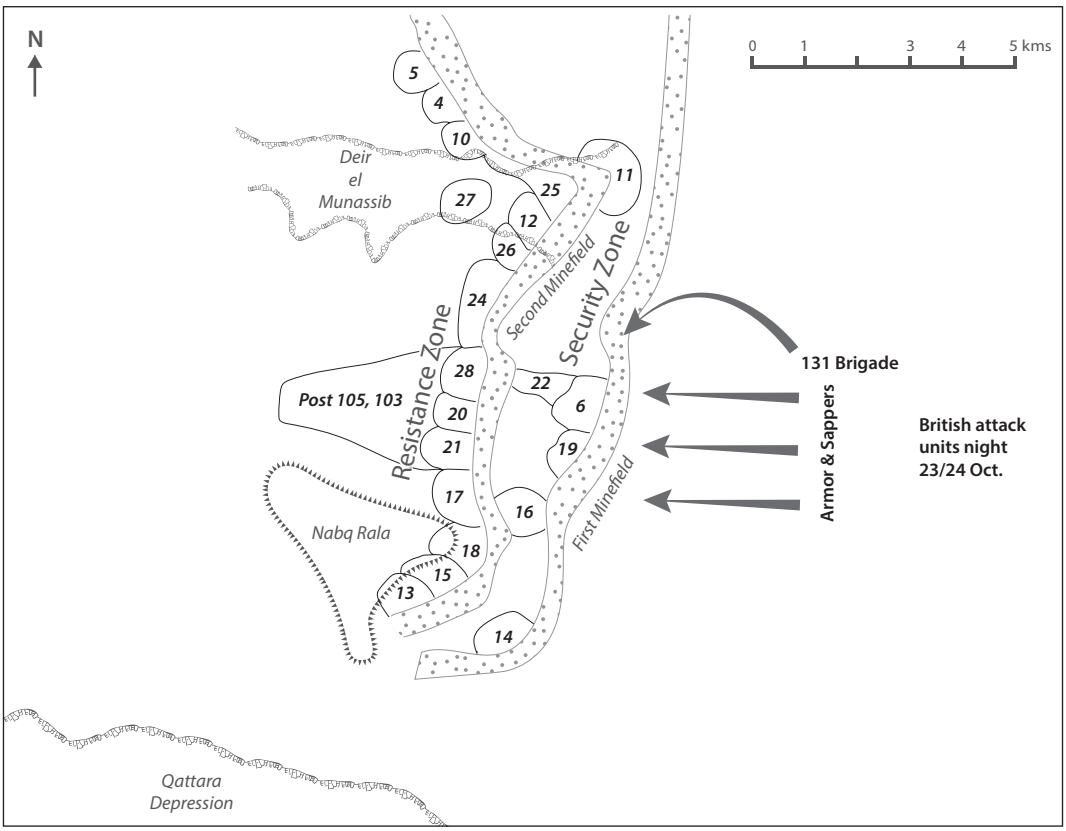
Prior to the start of the Battle of El Alamein, General Georg Stumme was the *de facto* commander of the Axis forces, since Rommel was on sick leave, while General Frattini had been nominated interim commander of the X Army Corps, since General Ferrari Orsi had died walking into a minefield just a few days earlier.

Narrowing in on the detailed deployment of the Italian paratroopers on the night of 23 October, the *Folgore* units were sandwiched between the Munassib Depression and the hills of Qaret el Himeimat-Naqb Rala. The division was responsible for holding approximately 10 miles of the southernmost sector (roughly 15 percent of the El Alamein Front) of the Axis line of defense that bordered into the El Qattara Depression. The 187th Regiment of Lieutenant Colonel Alberto Bechi Luserna – comprising of the II, IV and IX Battalions (while X Battalion had been disbanded due to heavy losses sustained at Deir Alinda, and its remaining soldiers had been merged into the IX) – held the northern area of El Munassib; two battalions (the VII and VIII), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Carlo Ruspoli (the so-called '*Raggruppamento Ruspoli*', or '*Ruspoli* Group'), held the forward positions in the middle (Posts 103, 105 and 115), while the forces of the 186th Regiment – led by Colonel Pietro Tantillo – held the southern flank on the Qaret el Himeimat (VI Battalion) and the Naqb Rala (V Battalion) Plateaus.

Each regiment had its own mortar company, with six mortars (model 81mm) and a light anti-tank artillery unit, with six 47/32mm guns. The regiments were supported by the 185th *Reggimento Artiglieria Paracadutisti*, the *Folgore's* artillery unit, which was comprised of approximately 600 soldiers sub-divided into three battalions. Each of these artillery units had twelve 47/32mm anti-tank guns and six 81mm mortar units. These artillery units were interspersed on the defensive line – providing support to the infantry tactical groups.

It is important to note that Rommel's so-called 'corseting system' – interspersing Italian and German troops along the front line so that the latter's superior firepower was equally distributed – covered only the northern section of the El Alamein line. In the southern sector, more than 90 percent of the front line was manned by the three Italian infantry divisions (*Folgore*, *Pavia* and *Brescia*).

At the time, the *Folgore* Division had a strength of approximately 4,000 paratroopers and its ranks had been replenished by an attachment of 1,000 soldiers (mainly 600 men of the XXXI Battalion, *Guastatori del Genio* (sappers) and 400 infantrymen of the 2nd Battalion, 28th Regiment, *Pavia* Division). The *Gustatori* were another Special Force within the Italian Army, which had also received very intensive training. At El Alamein, they were led by Major Paolo Caccia Dominioni and their main objective had been to improve the minefield defenses prior to the British offensive. Their original role was an offensive one, which was to act as assault engineers to eliminate key enemy positions and fortifications. The battalion was comprised of 600 soldiers – sub-divided into two companies. Each company was divided into two branches: a destruction and a support unit. The former was tasked with destroying enemy defenses – and was heavily armed with flamethrowers, demolition charges, torpedoes and mortars – while the latter had a light machine gun and mortar section to provide defensive coverage for the attack.



Map 4.1 This map shows the deployment of the *Folgore* Division's infantry companies prior to the start of the battle, with respect to the main locations on the line (Deir el Munassib and Nabq Rala) and the minefields. (Redrawn by George Anderson based upon the following original source: Author's own sketch)

During the El Alamein battle, this unit took on a purely defensive focus and it was deployed in the middle sector in support of *Ruspoli* Group.

To protect from an enemy armored or aerial attack, the paratroopers were deployed in concealed defensive works, such as dugouts and stone *sandars* in the desert. Some positions were heavily camouflaged and would serve as observation posts or positions, from which infantry would spring into action once enemy troops had overstepped them. These were narrow foxholes – often without parapets and heavily camouflaged so that the tank crews could not recognize them. In addition, to provide further protection, some of these positions were also protected by a belt of mines. Crew-served weapons were typically deployed in dug-in pits, or in emplacements – protected by parapets of rocks as defensive shields. Being situated on higher ground, the two extreme tips of the *Folgore* deployment (Deir el Munassib and Naqb Rala) offered some type of protection from enemy armor. Here, the fortifications were more elaborate, as the hilly terrain allowed the paratroopers to conceal the anti-tank screen within small caves or behind large boulders. The vast majority of the fortifications, however, were on the flat desert landscape, with little or no vegetation.

Each battalion held a section of the front (approximately two miles per battalion), with one company manning the forward defenses and the other two the more robust defenses in the rear. The first line of defense was a security zone, which was, in essence, comprised of two huge minefields

– with anti-tank and anti-personnel mines – and various types of traps, such as anti-tank ditches and barbed wire. It was also comprised of a number of forward outposts near the minefields, which were manned by a single infantry company, a platoon or, in some cases, by two or three infantrymen. These forces were responsible for not only monitoring enemy movements, but also to keep hostile forces out of the minefields. The advanced line troops were to provide careful observation of the field of battle so that they would be able to sound the alarm when enemy tanks were within their sight. They also had to perform rapid patrols of the front line to determine if small groups of enemy saboteurs had penetrated the minefields to make breaches in the wire. Most importantly, these soldiers comprised the first line of resistance against both an armored or an infantry attack and, as a result, they would be the ones to bear the brunt of an enemy attack. Most of the positions – or firing points – in the security zone had been reinforced with barbed wire, and some were heavily camouflaged. If any of these positions were lost during the enemy assault, it was envisioned that they would be taken back through local counter-attacks. In accordance with German paratrooper tactics, the *Folgore* units were trained – and also expected – to forcefully push back when infantry positions had been compromised. If a position was lost, the response would involve:

1 Subjecting the area to heavy artillery fire in order to annihilate enemy forces which had occupied it
2 Implementing immediate local counter-attacks by infantry, with support from heavier weapons, such as mortars and anti-tank guns

The purpose of the counter-attacks was to seal the defenses and push back the enemy while he was still consolidating his hold on the new positions. These offensive thrusts would typically be executed by attacking the flanks of the enemy deployment. As Quarrie asserts, the paratroopers' 'main role was seizure of key objectives, which had to be held until relieved by landed units. *Fallschirmjäger* were trained to stand at all costs, and according to German tactical doctrine, to counterattack where necessary to maintain their positions. Although these tactics were to prove costly, they also ensured that *Fallschirmjäger*-held positions were always the hardest to overcome'.[5]

The second line was the so-called 'resistance zone', which was based upon a system of fortifications (either non-communicating stone *sandars*, or a series of strongpoints hosting a machine gun or an anti-tank gun, with zig-zagging trenches) – each of which was manned by the two remaining companies of each battalion. These were more sturdy defenses, with a greater number of crew-served weapons. The trenches were more elaborate and deeper in order to provide a greater degree of protection from an enemy barrage or a tank assault. The units holding the secondary positions were responsible for shooting against enemy tanks and infantry with a combination of weapons. Enemy tanks, for instance, were to be stopped primarily with a heavy concentration of rifle and machine gun fire and hand and smoke grenades aimed at blinding the tank crews; in the meantime, the anti-tank guns were to concentrate their fire against the tracks to paralyze it. While the larger armor-piercing weapons were to focus their fire continually against enemy armored units, the paratroop units armed with lighter weapons – such as hand grenades, rifles, light machine guns and mortars – were to focus their fire upon the infantry unit accompanying the tank. The imperative was to separate the infantry travelling on foot from the tanks.

Folgore senior officer Giovanni Verando had outlined to the Italian High Command the rather precarious position of the paratrooper division at El Alamein. Its major deficiencies were well known, but little had been done by the Italian High Command to rectify the situation since the unit had been dispatched to North Africa:

5 Bruce Quarrie, *German Airborne Divisions: Mediterranean Theatre 1942-45* (Botley: Osprey, 2004), p.73.

> Given the lack of infantry troops our defenses were rather lightly occupied and left much to be desired. The ratio between available men to the width of the frontline was low. In particular, the center of our defense system held by Ruspoli Group was very thinly occupied and it had to be reinforced by a battalion from the Pavia Infantry Division. Both our forces and anti-tank units were few while our enemy could deploy hundreds of tanks. Our understrength battalions, each with a force of 400 infantrymen, were each responsible for occupying up to 3000 meters of frontline…. In addition, the Division had no reserves. It had an insufficient number of artillery pieces and transports. Moreover, our supply line from the logistical base of El Daba to El Alamein, which ran in parallel to the frontline, was highly exposed to enemy infiltrations or barrages.
>
> Our efforts to improve our supply lines, create a reserve unit and secure more artillery units were unsuccessful given the scarcity of resources available to the Italian High Command in North Africa.[6]

The biggest crisis facing the *Folgore* at El Alamein was its light artillery screen, which was insufficient and couldn't compensate for the lack of depth (and the rather static line of infantry defense). The second biggest crisis facing the division was the continuous attrition amongst the ranks of the frontline infantry units. The daily casualties – due to enemy fire and disease – sustained in these static defensive positions were not sustainable, as there were no available reinforcements.

Since the defensive line consisted, for the most part, of trenches and foxholes on the flat desert surface, Rommel envisioned that the enemy armor would first be entrapped in the minefields. As the tanks were forced to slow down and penetrate the minefields in a few narrow gaps, the Axis artillery – strategically positioned to exploit the gaps – could concentrate fire against the motorized columns and hopefully halt their advance. Once the tanks had advanced past the minefields, a spider web-like disposition – made up of multiple foxholes and trenches – allowed for a flexible anti-tank defensive approach. If one of these fortified positions was overrun, the enemy advance could be contained by the two nearest positions. These positions were defended by machine gun squads, automatic squads and anti-tank gun units so that they could be capable of battling against both infantry and armor. The plan was for the paratroopers to hold the line, wear down the attackers for as long as possible and prevent the enemy tanks from overstepping the fortified positions in the resistance zone. Once the paratroopers had inflicted serious damage to enemy armor and its infantry, it was envisioned that the Axis mechanized forces would eventually counter-attack and push them back.

To the rear of the *Folgore*'s positions, there was a third layer of defense – mainly comprised of the artillery emplacements (including heavy artillery and anti-tank guns). The artillery's role was to shell the enemy forces as they were advancing toward the Axis line, and also to provide concentrated fire in case either the British armored or the infantry units had been able to breach sections of the front line.

Prior to the Battle of El Alamein, British Intelligence efforts had revealed that this sector of the front line was 'held by some loosely-knit strongpoints defended mainly by Italians'.[7] The British had also correctly estimated that they were manned by three below-strength Italian infantry divisions (*Brescia*, *Folgore* and *Pavia*) and by German troops of *Ramcke* Brigade. The armored reserve was thought to be comprised of a mixed unit totaling 300 tanks from the 21st *Panzer* and *Ariete* Divisions, while the artillery positions were comprised of medium and heavy guns (including 40 *Flak* 88mm German guns). For the most part, the British Intelligence assessment was fairly accu-

6 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 1160/C/11: Verando, p.2.
7 Walker, *Official History*, p.281.

rate: the infantry units were all below strength and were deployed in scattered strongpoints along the defensive line. The armored reserve did consist of the *Ariete* and the 21st *Panzer* Divisions; however, the total number of available tanks was probably less than 250 units, while there were only a few (less than 25) 88mm German guns. These guns were primarily positioned on the northern edge in support of the *Ramcke* Brigade.

During the first three weeks of October, these Axis defensive positions had been battered continuously by the British artillery in an attempt to wear down the infantry troops in preparation of the main operation. They had also been subjected to heavy air bombardments, as the Royal Air Force had kept up the pressure both during night and day attacks. These daily barrages had taken a heavy toll and had also claimed the life of several soldiers – including two officers: Major Giovanni Bergonzi – commander of the VI Battalion – and Major Vincenzo Patella of the IV Battalion.

The night of October 23/24

The aim outlined by 13th British Army Corps in the southern sector was to 'destroy the enemy east of his main position'[8] with a combined arms attack just south of Deir el Munassib – thus, the main point of attack was not directed on the main strongpoints, but against its least fortified flank. At the same time, the Free France forces were tasked with conquering the Qaret el Himeimat Height – the hill which dominated the battlefield positions – with a wide encircling movement. The latter was, in essence, the second strongpoint that hinged the southern defenses. Ultimately, the Allies wanted to penetrate the Axis positions, engage and destroy tank and artillery units, and then finally reach the rear positions at Deir Alinda and the Taqa Plateaus. The heavy lifting was to be provided by the vastly experienced 7th Armored Division (the 'Desert Rats'), which was 'expected to employ its mixture of light and heavy armor and supporting arms to its best advantage in the mobile battle envisaged in isolating and overpowering the enemy outposts'.[9]

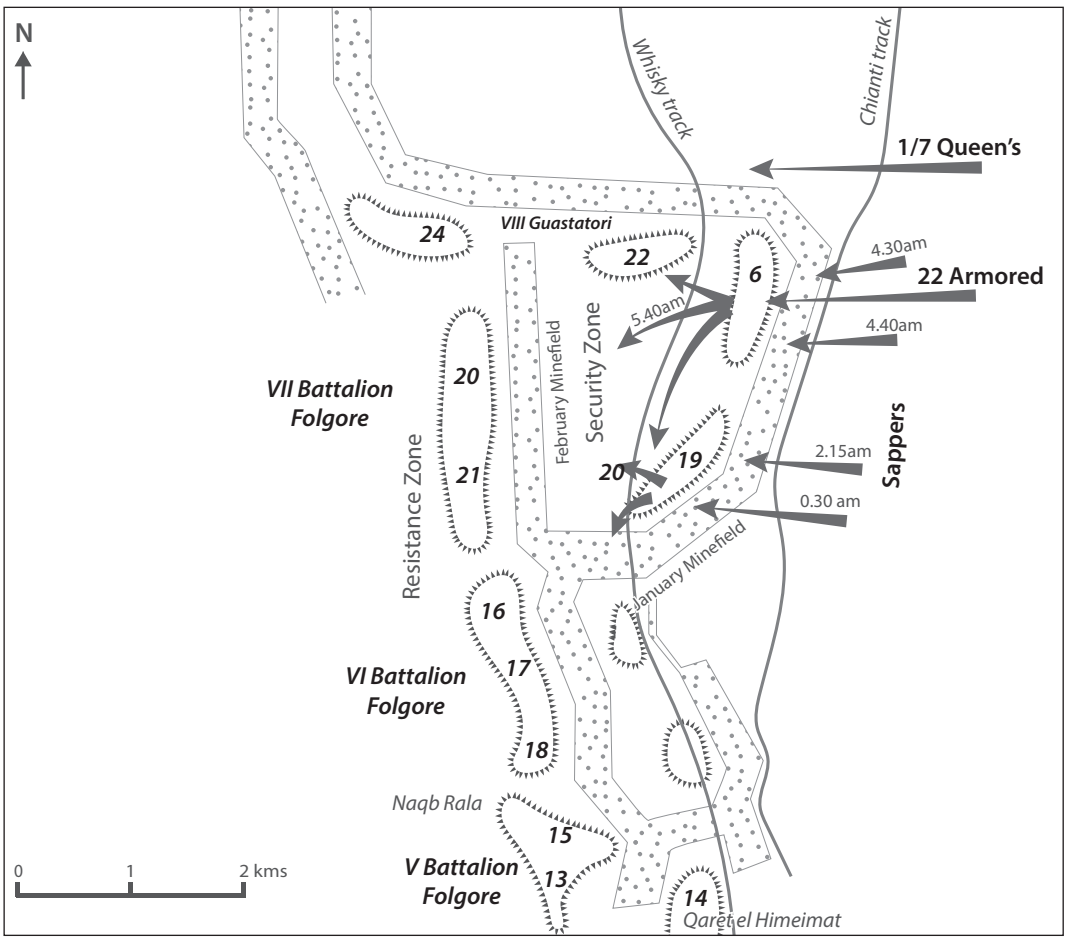
A) Attacks on Posts 115, 105 and 103

The main British attack on the first night of operations was thus directed against the bulge in the middle of the Axis Southern Front line: between Deir el Munassib and Qaret el Himeimat, occupied by *Ruspoli* Group. These positions, sandwiched between the two minefields 'January' and 'February', consisted primarily of non-communicating strongholds that were cut off from the resistance zone. They were occupied by three companies (6th, 22nd and 19th), with a combined force of approximately 450 infantrymen, twelve 47/32mm gun crews and mortar units. A small detachment of the *Folgore*'s 185th Artillery Regiment was also bolstering these forward firing points with four additional anti-tank guns. The positions occupied by the 6th and the 19th Companies were the most exposed – being situated approximately 20 meters behind the first minefield ('January'). Their left flank was defended by VIII *Guastatori* – a sapper unit – and the 24th Company, which was situated along the northern edge of the second minefield. The right flank, located as well behind 'February', was manned by the two remaining infantry companies (20th and 21st) of *Ruspoli* Group.

During the night of 23 October, these firing points had been hammered continuously by the artillery, with a combination of creeping barrage and significant concentrations of fire against key fortifications and gun emplacements. The British artillery units deployed all of their 25 pdr guns for the creeping barrage – moving it forward 100 yards every three minutes. Medium-sized

8 Ibid., p.281.
9 Ibid., p.281.

units – mainly 6 pdr guns – were used to shell Axis Command centers and artillery strongpoints in a bid to neutralize them and thus facilitate the infantry assault. It is estimated that the British used more than 900 artillery pieces during Operation 'Lightfoot' and that these units fired more than one million shells at the enemy's defenses. In addition, the Royal Air Force also contributed with its bombers – dropping 125 tons of bombs on the enemy positions. Given the intensity of the barrage, by the time the infantry assault commenced, all communications between the forward firing points and the more robust *Folgore* positions in the resistance zone had been disrupted. The barrage had not only isolated the infantry manning the forward strongholds, but had also inflicted the first casualties of the battle, as well as the devastation of multiple trenches, gun emplacements and dugouts. Even General Stumme's command center was totally cut off from communicating with frontline units by this World War One-type overpowering artillery preparatory fire.



Map 4.2 The Battle of El Alamein – *Folgore* line deployment, 24 October 1942: this map shows an attack against *Ruspoli* Group – defending the advanced Post 105 – by a combined British armored and infantry force. The map also shows that the 6th and 19th Companies took the brunt of the enemy attack. (Redrawn by George Anderson based upon the following original source: Mario Montanari, *Le Operazioni in Africa Settentrionale, v. 3* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1990))

An Italian desert foxhole for a tank hunter. From these dugouts – that were usually well camouflaged and very hard to see – the soldier would let a tank or an infantry unit pass him by and then attempt to assail them from behind with hand grenades. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

A flamethrower operator of the VIII *Guastatori* unit. The soldier wears a special protective suit, steel helmet, gas mask and gloves. The flamethrower was used primarily against pillboxes or machine gun firing points. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

The British attack was led by the 131st Brigade – consisting of three battalions of the Queen's Royal Regiment of West Surrey. As the above map illustrates, its 7th Battalion was to advance on the British right flank to occupy the ground and clear the enemy's positions. The infantry's primary objective was to nullify the anti-tank gun and machine gun screen positioned in the forward firing points. Once the flanking screen had been cleared, the focus of the attack was to switch toward degrading the Axis defenses – and especially its minefields. It was envisioned that once the minefields had been undermined, the armored formations would be able to advance and envelope the whole defensive line. The special minefield decommissioning unit was a mixed mobile armored and infantry formation, and it was comprised of the 4th and 21st Field Squadrons, RE; two companies of the 1st Rifle Brigade; six Scorpion tanks; and the Bren gun mobile squads of the 11th Hussars and 14th Division. This unit had to engage the central firing points of *Ruspoli* Group – mainly those located on Posts 103, 105 and 115 – while clearing four minefield gaps.[10]

Finally, the heavy armor was to consolidate the attack by overcoming any enemy resistance. The armored tank formations of the 22nd Armored Brigade were to push through – once the gaps had been created – by encircling and smashing the enemy's multiple firing points. To this end, the British had made available for the attack a huge armored force comprised of approximately 200 vehicles – including tanks, mobile field artillery units, anti-tank guns and machine gun mobile units, and lorried infantry. These units, in turn, were followed by the 4th Light Armored Brigade – deployed on four columns for a total of 100 vehicles – whose ultimate aim was to reach the Deir el Alinda Plateau.

At the onset of the battle, the *Folgore* war diary reported that 'during the night on October 23/24 a most violent and unprecedented artillery barrage crashed down on our defenses at El Alamein. Later in the night, as the barrage subsided, we heard the tanks approaching as their tracks clattered in the distance'.[11] On the British side, the night of October 23 saw 'a snakelike procession of a mass of tanks and guns and other vehicles in an atmosphere of dusk, smoke and noise'.[12]

At 2100, the British 7th Queen's Battalion began to march forward under the cover of a large-scale artillery preparation fire aimed at softening the enemy's positions. At 2230, as the battalion had reached the start line and its units were making last-minute preparations for the attack, the Italian artillery began its barrage in earnest. This counter-preparation fire – coming on the heels of the massive British barrage – surprised the infantrymen of the 7th Battalion, which were still immobilized on their start line, and broke up their formations. Three officers of the 7th Queen's Battalion – including the second-in-command, who were exhorting their men forward – were killed at the onset of the battle. Soon after, more artillery shells rained in – killing more than 50 infantrymen. This early setback created some initial confusion amongst the ranks of the attackers, as it quickly became clear that the preparatory barrage had not silenced the Axis anti-gun screen. The unit's own official historical account states: '… five minutes before zero-hour for the attack the enemy brought shell and mortar fire down on the battalion, and there were a considerable number of casualties'.[13] Despite the early casualties sustained, the infantry began to move forward by rushing the Axis defenses. Shortly after, as the British battalion – rallied by its commanding officer – was closing in on the Axis defensive line, its forward infantry units again came under heavy machine gun and mortar fire from a number of flanking firing points.

10 Playfair, *The Mediterranean*, pp.42-43.

11 Paolo Caccia Dominioni (ed.), *Le Trecento Ore a Nord di Qattara: Antologia di una Battaglia* (Milan: Libreria Militare Editrice, 2012), p.36.

12 G.L. Verney, *The Desert Rats* (London: Hutchinson, 1954), p.131.

13 Queen's Royal Surrey Regiment war diary: <http://www.queensroyalsurreys.org.uk/ww2/middle_east/qme015.shtml> (accessed 20 May 2014).

Lieutenant Giuseppe Ceriana, commander of an anti-tank gun unit, recalls that:

> I made sure that our artillery guns were trained in front of the minefield gap. The latter was being exploited by infantry on foot walking at a fast pace in one single column…. When the enemy infantry was about 500 meters from our defensive positions I yelled out to my crew: 'Fire!' The first two shots landed on the rapidly advancing columns creating two huge holes in their ranks. But they kept coming toward us and the battle raged all night.[14]

The following are the recollections of the leader of a mortar unit – describing the early stages of the battle on the broader battlefield of Posts 103 and 105:

> The guns of the Pavia Division positioned behind the battalion's command post have already opened fire, while our troops located in the forward firing points have signaled with purple rocket flares that they have been surrounded. The enemy has opened a gap in the minefield and has penetrated into our defenses while the tanks have also exploited the breach by investing our positions. The lieutenant accordingly ordered the mortar platoon to open fire upon the gap. My weapon was the first to go into action that night. The mortar, whose steel tube was already very hot, began to spit out one explosive grenade after the other in rapid succession. Soon after as the other mortars of our platoon joined the action we had a full orchestra in operation. While the shells from the Pavia's guns were passing over our heads, the grenades from my weapon kept rising toward the gloomy night sky only to then precipitously land with devastating effect on the battleground.[15]

Faced by the intensive Axis interdiction fire, the British infantry – advancing behind a heavy smoke and dust screen – was nevertheless able to penetrate into the January minefield at approximately 0000. As it rushed past the minefield and toward the *Folgore's* forward firing points, it continued to suffer additional casualties – mainly from fixed-line machine gun fire. Its vanguard assault unit, however – comprised by elements of 'A' and 'D' Companies and the battalion's headquarters – sped ahead and penetrated some of these forward firing points and overran one of the main strongholds in the security zone. Ten Italian infantrymen were killed, while eight were captured. The assault unit, which by then, had advanced much further into the enemy's defenses than the bulk of its battalion, shortly after began to move south in an attempt to link up with the bulk of the infantry and the sappers, but as it was crossing the minefield behind some of the enemy's positions, it was subjected to an unexpected counter-attack. The paratroopers deployed in small groups and under the cover of darkness, approached the assault unit and besieged it with hand grenades and rifle fire. A fierce close-range confrontation ensued, with heavy casualties on both sides. Ultimately, the paratroopers were able to repel the British assault, as its forward units – under the pressure of the counter-attack – became disorganized and began withdrawing. The swift response by the defenders had resulted in the splintering of the infantry attack, as small groups of British soldiers, which had been cut off by the counter-attack, were captured. Other British soldiers – including the battalion's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Roderick Burton – were cut down while trying to retreat toward 'January', while few others managed to escape and to take up positions at the head of the 'January' minefield gaps. The regiment's official history, in fact, remarks that the 'battalion headquarters was counterattacked and its men killed or taken prisoner'.[16]

14 Dominioni (ed.), *Le Trecento*, p.132.
15 Ibid., p.132.
16 James Lucas, *War in the Desert: The Eight Army at El Alamein* (New York: Beaufort Books, 1982), p.178.

Italian sappers attacking an enemy position in North Africa in 1942. These are likely to be troops of the VIII *Guastatori* (engineer/trench-buster unit) that fought alongside the *Folgore* during the Battle of El Alamein. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Guastatore from the VIII *Guastatori* unit showing how to properly lob a hand grenade. (Archivio Centrale dello Stato – national archive, Rome)

A *bersaglieri* firing point with a *Fucile* S (anti-tank rifle). It could penetrate – at a distance of 300 yards – a 30mm-thick enemy tank or vehicle. This weapon was carried by two men and was sometimes found on tanks, armored cars and motorcycles. It was effective only against light armored vehicles and often used to keep mechanized patrols at a distance. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

The VIII *Guastatori* unit attacking an enemy strongpoint in North Africa.
(Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

A sapper in North Africa. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

An artillery unit believed to be from *Folgore* in North Africa. Note the vehicles and the guns (British 25pdrs) that had probably been captured during Operation Beresford and were then utilized by the Axis forces during the campaign. Note also the sand-like color cover on the ground that was likely used to camouflage the equipment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

After the counter-attack had blocked the infantry advance, there was a pause in the fighting. The bulk of the 7th Battalion dug in the 'January' minefield, but it continued to suffer heavy casualties, as it was being held in check (mainly from machine gun and mortar fire). As a result, the troops were forced to disperse within the minefield, while the artillery barrage deterred them from making any offensive movement aimed at a further advance against the resistance zone – thus by 0100, the first prong of the British offensive had stalled. Its assault units had penetrated into the security zone, but had been thrown back by the counter-attack, while its rear units were pinned to the ground by the artillery barrage. The assault had cost the Queen's Battalion dearly, as it suffered the following casualties: 76 killed or missing and 104 wounded.[17] The regiment's diary reports that 'in the battle of El Alamein the brigade fought in the Southern Front, and its attacks during 23-24 of October the enemy minefields were breached but at a cost which resulted in the cancellation of the operation'.[18] On the Axis side, there were heavy casualties as well: both 6th and 22nd Company losses estimated at 40 dead and 20 taken prisoner.

At the same time that the 7th Queen's had advanced north, the sapper units had begun their dangerous work of attempting to open four gaps in the middle of the January minefield; however, as soon as the anti-mine units entered the minefield, they encountered stiff resistance from the paratroopers, which opened fire immediately after the artillery barrage had passed over them. As the official history of the Rifle Brigade states: 'The enemy brought heavy fire from artillery, mortars and machine guns to bear on those waiting for the gapping to be completed. A Company suffered casualties almost at once'.[19]

Despite the concentrated fire, the sappers were enabled to continue their task by the protection provided by numerous armored vehicles, which engaged in a protracted duel with the *Folgore's* mortar and anti-tank gun units; however, throughout the night, the mine-gapping parties continued to suffer losses from strong fire from well-concealed gun and mortar units, which the tanks and carriers were ultimately unable to subdue. These units concentrated their fire upon where the gaps were being made, and were facilitated in this endeavor by the fact that as some vehicles were set on fire, they lit up the battleground. One by one, the Scorpion anti-mine tanks were put out of action by a combination of anti-tank gun shells and by running into scattered mines, as Lieutenant Colonel Michael Carver of the Royal Scots Greys asserts: '… the breaching force suffered heavy casualties from shellfire and from infantry of Folgore division dug in just behind the minefield…[20]

Undaunted by the enemy fire, the sappers persisted in their work. By 0100, the task force had managed to clear three out of the four anticipated gaps, and the two companies of the 1st Rifle Brigade were the first to exploit them. At approximately 0130, these units brought forward the biggest British blow of the night by smashing through the Italian forward firing points. 'A' Company advanced on the two northern gaps, while 'B' Company advanced on the southern gap. At first, 'A' Company's advance progressed well, as three machine gun nests were swiftly overrun and cleared,[21] but as it was closing in on the enemy's positions in the resistance zone, 'A' Company was attacked by two para platoons armed primarily with hand grenades, and it was also subjected to heavy fire by an anti-tank unit. Although the anti-tank gun was later found abandoned and its crew dead, this rearguard action halted the British advance by inflicting heavy casualties upon 'A'

17 Walker, *Official History*, p.286.
18 Jack Haswell, *The Queen's Royal Regiment of West Surrey* (London: H. Hamilton, 1967), pp.130-31.
19 Robin Hastings, *The Rifle Brigade in the Second World War 1939-1945* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1950), p.52.
20 Michael Carver, *Second to None: The Royal Scot Greys 1919-1945* (Glasgow: Mccorquodale & Co., 1962), p.62.
21 Hastings, *The Rifle Brigade*, p.52.

Company, which by then, 'had been reduced to about forty men and was amalgamated with B Company'.[22]

Meanwhile, 'B' Company had initially advanced on the third, southern gap, but its progress had been impeded by a machine gun nest situated on the flank, which commenced firing – causing heavy casualties to the infantrymen running in the open desert. Numerous attempts to silence the gun were made, but they were all unsuccessful. As a result, the infantrymen of 'B' Company were forced to the ground by this persistent hail of machine gun fire. As this unit of the 1st Rifle Brigade stalled, the mobile forces followed in their path by advancing through the gaps. Major General Harding had, by then, decided to send in the armor – even if only three out of the four gaps had been cleared, since it was still dark (and hence the tanks still had a chance to break through without having to fully collide with the anti-tank guns).

A number of armored units of 5th Royal Tanks drove through the two northern gaps, while the Scots Greys progressed on the southern gap. The tanks – some assisted by dismounted infantry – were able to surround the numerous enemy firing points and were also able to crush a number of gun emplacements. After the tanks had barreled their way through, the vast area of the security zone had been lost and the Italians were forced to evacuate it. It was at this point that a sizable number of the paras of 6th and 19th Companies were captured, after their positions on Posts 103 and 115 had been surrounded by both tanks and infantry. Only a small minority were able to escape capture or death by making their way back to the resistance zone. For instance, going into the battle, the 6th Company had 130 infantrymen and only 17 of its men were able to pull back into the resistance zone after the tanks had invaded their position.[23]

As the tanks and infantry units broke with force through the 6th Company firing points, the latter initially responded by firing at close range – fighting back mainly with machine guns and rifles – but eventually, the British infantry and its armor gained ground and eventually stormed their frontline defenses.

One of the few survivors of the fighting from that company recalls:

> At midnight the artillery barrage began to relent while a huge smokescreen was laid in front of our positions so that we were prevented from seeing the battlefield. We could, however, hear the noise from the clatter of the armored vehicles. As the smoke cleared on our left flank, we were presented with an unforgettable scene: a multitude of Bren carriers, tanks, troops on foot and others riding on lorries and armored vehicles. We were all shocked and dazed by this massive deployment of armor and men with its overwhelming superiority of heavy weapons. Some of these units, which were advancing our way, then bypassed our positions and continued to drive toward the resistance zone. By then, our forward position had in fact been completely surrounded by armored vehicles.
>
> It was at that point that Lieutenant Brandi said to me: This is it! The battle has begun!
>
> The first enemy action of the night that was directed specifically against our position was carried out by the armor. A tank leading a small armored formation was spotted in the distance heading toward our position at a high rate of speed. When it reached a distance of approximately 300 meters from our emplacement, the tank crew spotted us. The tank then stopped and began firing tracer bullets which just barely passed over our heads. It then bypassed us and it headed toward the resistance zone.

22 Ibid., p.52.

23 Ufficio Storico: 187 Reggimento Folgore, Relazione del Comandante interinale del 187 Reggimento Folgore il tenente colonnello Alberto Bechi Luserna, 'La Divisione Folgore nella battaglia 23-29 Ottobre di Alamein' (1942), p.4.

A few minutes later two armored vehicles and twenty soldiers on foot, which were at our backs, spotted us, turned around and headed our way. As the vehicles bypassed us, our lieutenant screamed out loudly, ordering us to go on the attack. We then jumped out of our dugout and began to hurl hand grenades against our enemy. Our lieutenant then launched a grenade that exploded on the side of an armored car, but without causing it any damage. We then put down heavy machine gun fire pinning the foot soldiers down to the ground. During this exchange of fire, the enemy unit sustained some casualties. As this first challenge to our position relented we went back into our trenches. The assault was to resume a few minutes later from our left flank as another group of infantrymen following an armored vehicle closed down on our trenches. The vehicle passed over our foxhole and then sped away. While I repositioned the machine gun and began to fire, our mortar unit also joined the action. During a protracted exchange of fire, we suffered our first casualties. I recall Possini screaming, as he had sustained an injury to his right leg when the tracks of a tank steamrolled over our position and stepped over his body. Sergeant Bodriti had been shot and his face was bleeding profusely. Corporal Maiolatesi had also been injured and his hand would later be amputated.

While we were tending to our injured comrades, another armored vehicle, followed by more soldiers on foot, resumed the assault against our firing point. For a second time our lieutenant ordered us to jump out of our trenches with a handful of grenades that we lobbed against the vehicle and the infantry. As the vehicle was hit by one of the grenades thrown by the lieutenant, it sped away and we returned inside our trenches.

A while later another British tank roared in front of our position firing tracer bullets. Lieutenant Brandi was leaning over the trench observing it advance when he was hit in the face by a burst of machine gun fire and his body fell back down into the trench. A piece of his jaw was dangling from the rest of his face and he was unable to talk clearly, but I quickly attended to him by stemming the bleeding…. At dawn a formation of ten Bren carriers and a few tanks encircled our position and a few minutes later, as all resistance was pointless at that time, we were forced to surrender and exit our trenches. We had been captured.[24]

By dawn, the British had consolidated the two bridgeheads just past 'January' and had been successful in dislodging the paratroopers from all their advanced machine gun nests and anti-tank emplacements within the security zone. Here, the battle had been a duel primarily between the advancing British armored vehicles and the Axis infantry – attempting to stand its ground with anti-tank and mortar fire and, in some cases, with hand grenades. Ultimately, the tanks had penetrated the strongholds of the forward companies – smashing up all the gun emplacements. Facing no resistance, the mobile units were then able to sweep behind and punch through the strongholds held by the 20th and 21st Companies, which were holding the second line of defense.

Corporal Luciano Maiolatesi of *Folgore's* 6th Company recalled when his position – in defense of the security zone – was attacked on the night of 23/24 October:

The bombs crashing down on our strongholds created a thick smokescreen preventing me from operating the machine gun. But when the barrage stopped and the smoke began to clear I saw many enemy soldiers approaching our position. I immediately opened fire. I could see enemy troops running all over the outer perimeter of our defenses. They would run, then throw themselves to the ground and then resume their approach to the minefield. The first infantry assault was repulsed. A little later another attempt to breach our defenses with light armored vehicles and infantry was also pushed back. Finally, the heavy tanks roared into our

24 Compagnoni, *Altri Tempi*, p.314.

> positions, overran them, and silenced numerous firing points…. At dawn there was a pause in the fighting allowing us to regroup. I looked around at our strongpoint and I could not recognize it anymore. In a few hours a lot had changed: the minefield no longer existed, the ground was littered with shell-holes, there were a number of disabled tanks smoldering in the distance and dead bodies scattered all over…. The break in the fighting, however, did not last long. The assault soon resumed and eventually the enemy stormed my position. A few minutes later an explosion injured my right arm and I was later captured.[25]

By 0500 – after having overwhelmed the forward outposts – the British armor began to threaten those of the 22nd Company, which held the last buffer still standing between 'February' and the resistance zone. With improved visibility and maneuverability, the tanks went after the anti-tank guns first. These were knocked out – one by one – by a more cautious approach. Instead of barreling their way through, the British armor would advance slowly – and once they had reached a distance of 150 yards of an enemy gun emplacement, they would fire off multiple rounds of high-capacity grenades. After a brief exchange of fire, the company's three anti-tank gun units were knocked out consecutively. The armor then turned its attention upon the multiple machine gun sets. After the tankers located their positions, they then proceeded to silence them by strafing the gun crews. In the confrontation with the armor, the latter had no chance and, for the most part, were all killed in their emplacements while still firing their weapons. Only two servers were able to escape the onslaught, and did so by breaking away and running for cover into the positions in the resistance zone. Suddenly, the 22nd Company's firing points had collapsed under the weight of the armored attack. Without field artillery positioned alongside its firing points, the 22nd proved incapable of stopping the armor.

After having decimated the forward positions on the north flank of Post 105, a few armored units drove south in order to menace the forward positions held by the 16th Company. The latter were first subjected to a heavy barrage by tanks firing multiple high-explosive shells and spraying machine gun fire; then the tanks attempted to roll into their positions, but the men of the 16th Company – along with its three anti-tank gun units – opened fire at close range against the armor. Since the initial British armored deployment against the 16th Company was limited, the prompt concentrated fire of the paratroopers was strong enough to disperse the tanks – forcing them to bypass their position.

At approximately 0530 on 24 October, the British armored units – urged on by General Harding, who was determined in seizing on the temporary advantage – pushed ahead by investing the positions within the resistance zone. A force of approximately 70 tanks – including the heavier Crusader and Grant units, which were, for the most part, impervious to the light 47/32mm gun – came smashing into the resistance zone posts held by the 20th and 21st Companies. As the tanks rolled closer to the resistance zone, they hit against the two artillery attachments: the twelve batteries of 100/17mm howitzers and twelve 75/27mm guns.

The divisional direct artillery units opened fire in order to block their advance. In addition to the field artillery, a small mechanized Axis formation – composed of a few tanks from the 21st *Panzer* Division and five *Semoventi* from the *Ariete* – also intervened in the fighting. Following a 10-minute barrage, the tanks leading the British formation came to a screeching halt. The first tank – after having been hit by five rounds of artillery – exploded in flames. In a few brief moments, a second and a third tank were also knocked out, while some of the carriers and armored vehicles were burning in the distance, and some additional tanks were thrown off the gap in the minefield.

25 Dominioni (ed.), *Le Trecento*, pp.217-218.

Throughout the artillery/tank confrontation, the artillery shells continued to arrive at a fairly steady pace upon the mobile columns.

Finally, 22nd Armored Brigade's commander, Pip Roberts – having determined that it was not possible to progress in full view at daylight against such a vigilant anti-tank screen – began to pull back his armor from the February minefield. This last-ditch effort by the 185th Artillery Regiment had managed to prevent an armored breakthrough into the open desert, which would have led to the encirclement of the Southern Front. 'As soon as I realized what was happening', states 187th Regiment commander Bechi Luserna, 'I called on our artillery units to begin shelling the armored units that had amassed in front of our main position. The latter were bombarded throughout the morning and suffered casualties. The massive concentration of enemy tanks and armored vehicles was clearly visible from my command post'.[26]

The attempt that began at 0530 to advance on 'February' was repelled by the forceful, concentrated fire of the paras of the VI Battalion, the Axis armor and the artillery units. The following are the reminiscences of the VI Battalion's commander:

> At dawn the British assaulted our positions with tanks, armored vehicles and infantry. We opened fire on them with everything we had including machine guns, rifles, mortars, and anti-tank guns. With the early morning light we were able to see smoldering vehicles in the distance, infantry men falling down raked by machine gun fire or thrown back by the explosions of hand grenades. Our ranks were also being decimated but overall our enemy suffered more casualties as they were out there in no man's land subjected to round after round of machine gun fire.[27]

The following is the summary of operations on the night of 23/24 October according to the *Folgore* Division war diary:

> The outposts held by Ruspoli's Group were submerged by enemy tanks and infantry. The most advanced positions held by Captain Marenco's 6th Company were first subjected to a heavy pounding by the artillery and were then surrounded by British combined arms units. Notwithstanding the withering barrage and the multiple assault waves put forth by both infantry and mobile units, the defenders were able to resist for six hours. Finally crushed by the massive weight of the attack, the units of 6th and 19th Companies were eventually overrun by the armored vehicles. Only after a series of fierce assaults were these paratroopers dislodged from these forward positions.[28]

The intense night of fighting had left behind a trail of devastation on the advanced firing points, with scattered dead bodies, burned-out tanks and smoldering armored vehicles. By dawn, the losses were so severe that 6th and 19th Companies had been wiped out and no longer existed as fighting units: out of approximately 350 soldiers, only 50 survived the first day of fighting, while 300 had been killed, injured or captured.

According to New Zealand's official military history, losses for 22nd Armored Brigade were 'estimated at 250 men killed, missing, or wounded, up to thirty carriers and a few tanks destroyed. One damaged Scorpion was unfortunately left within reach of enemy patrols'.[29] Losses to the 1st

26 Ufficio Storico: 187 Reggimento Folgore: Bechi Luserna, p.4.
27 Borgogni, *La Guerra di Ghino*, p.224.
28 Ufficio Storico: 187 Reggimento Folgore: Bechi Luserna, p.5.
29 Walker, *Official History*, p.286.

Rifle Brigade were also severe, as both of its companies had lost up to 50 percent of their men – thus on the early morning of 24 October, the attack stalled just beyond the first minefield, which had been breached, and was now occupied by the 5th Royal Tanks on the right and the Scots Greys on the left (comprising two bridgeheads)[30] – but ultimately, while the advanced firing points had been lost, further breaching of the second main minefield ('February') had been prevented mainly thanks to the intervention of the heavier howtizers and field guns.

B) Summing up

The tactical procedure used by the paratroopers during the first night of fighting would be applied again in the following nights of the battle. It consisted of trying to separate the attacking infantry units from the armor. Fighting alongside in a co-ordinated fashion, infantry and armor were very difficult to stop, while fighting individually, they were both much weaker and more vulnerable – thus by disaggregating the two, the attacking units were not only easier to repel, but in the long run, they would also tend to lose their offensive impetus. Although the armor could steamroll through the loosely-held positions, it could be impeded from advancing further by the artillery screen. Indeed, the latter – positioned on heights that had a commanding view of the battlefield – proved to be the barrier of last resort against an armored encirclement and a breakthrough. The armor halted its advance once it came under the heavy artillery barrage of the light and medium field guns during the early hours of the morning. This proved once again that it was very difficult for the armor to advance and succeed in full view of the enemy's artillery guns.

The infantry units could then focus upon stopping the foot assault with a combination of criss-cross machine gun fire, rifle fire and mortars and hand grenades:

> The fighting lasted for eight hours. When the gaps were made and the tanks broke into our positions they for the most part bypassed the forward firing points. The latter then concentrated their fire upon the advancing infantry units which had to force their way through by eliminating one firing point at a time. Enemy infantry units surrounded our strongholds but were ultimately not able to silence our main points in the resistance zone. In addition, the armored units, which had by then been separated from the infantry, could not properly maneuver through the minefield and were also initially impeded by the darkness from locating our main positions in the resistance zone.[31]

Although the forward-positioned units – such as those held by the 6th, 19th, 22nd and 16th Companies – had all suffered heavy losses, they had contributed to slowing down the enemy advance. They had not only successfully counter-attacked the infantry penetration, but had also delayed the tank advance by putting out of action the Scorpions and by obstructing the work of the sappers. In the end, their positions were overrun, but by then, they had blunted a breakthrough by the enemy forces. Given the slowness with which the night operations progressed, the armor was never in a position to reach the resistance zone before dawn and was, therefore, halted by the divisional artillery during the early hours of the morning. Had the tanks advanced sooner during the night, they could have overrun the field artillery – thus creating the conditions for a breakthrough.

30 Verney, *The Desert Rats*, p.131.
31 Migliavacca, *La Folgore*, p.60.

From a tactical perspective, British operational commanders also maintained that combined arms attacks of the sort of Operation 'Lightfoot' were successful only when armor and infantry operated in close co-ordination, as Niall Barr asserts:

> Montgomery believed that, once through the minefields, the armor would be able to use its combat power to full effect. However, the experience of the armor commanders had taught them of the danger of the German anti-gun screens even in open country and they believed that only infantry, supported by the artillery, could clear away the screen thus enabling the armor to maneuver.[32]

It appears that the first night of operations in the southern sector vindicated the operational commanders' belief on the benefits of combined arms operations, as the tanks alone could not overcome the anti-tank gun screen. It can be argued that the artillery units played a vital role in halting the attack, as *Panzerarmee Afrika* commander Georg Stumme's order to conserve heavy artillery ammunition during the early phase of the battle was not observed in the southern sector – thus, in contrast to the northern sector (where the Axis guns kept quiet), on Deir el Munassib, the artillery began pounding heavy infantry concentrations at the onset of the battle with intense counter-preparation fire. The artillery commander had, in fact, ordered his units to concentrate their fire in the area surrounding Post 105. As a result, under the combined fire of medium and light 47/32mm guns, the British infantry units 'fell into some confusion'[33] and some armored vehicles and tanks were knocked out of action early on during the night fighting.

Meanwhile, night-time operations enabled the anti-tank units to deploy their weapons at close range of enemy tanks, where the 47/32mm gun fought satisfactorily. Dawn brought about improved visibility, as the British tanks and armored vehicles – by previously keeping out of the reach of the anti-tank guns – were able to destroy a number of these units with their superior 75mm grenades. The same can be said for the machine gun emplacements, which became much more visible targets for the tank crews to overcome. As a result, a number of firing points were cleared, but ultimately, the attack stalled in front of the resistance zone during the early-morning hours. The field artillery units, with a clear view of the battlefield and with the enemy armor in plain view, blocked the enemy from making further advances.

C) The French siege of Naqb Rala

Concurrently on the same night, two Free French battalions attacked the right flank of the defensive positions occupied by the 186th *Folgore* Regiment on the southern edge of the Axis line (near Himeimat Hill). This assault was an important component of the overall Allied plan of operations in the southern sector. By occupying this fortified hill, the Allies would have seized possession of a key observation point that overlooked the terrain, on which the British 7th Armored Division had to make its advance.

As Himeimat garrison commander, Lieutenant Colonel Giuseppe Izzo recalled:

> By occupying Qaret el Himeimat the enemy would have unhinged the Axis main positions from its southern flank. Moreover, the enemy would have been in a position to dominate us from above giving his artillery a distinctive advantage point from which to shell the right wing

32 Barr, *Pendulum of War*, p.340.
33 Walker, *Official History*, p.286.

> of our defenses. It would also have allowed the British to outflank the Axis southern defenses and attack from the rear the *Folgore* Division and all of its supporting artillery units.[34]

The French plan of attack first involved the occupation of the smaller Naqb Rala Plateau, followed by the elimination of enemy defenses at Qaret el Himeimat, while the final step comprised linking up with the British 7th Armored Division for a push to Naqb el Khadim. The French maneuver aimed at outflanking the paratroop positions by advancing on the edge of the Qattara Depression and assaulting them from the rear. The two loosely-knit strongholds of Naqb Rala and Qaret el Himeimat – located on the southern edge of the Axis defensive line – were held by the *Folgore's* V Battalion. Its 13th and the 15th Companies held the former, while the 14th held the latter. In total, the battalion could count on 400 infantrymen – the bulk of which were on Qaret el Himeimat. Its artillery support consisted of one German *Flak* 88mm gun, seventeen 47/32mm anti-tank guns, three 81mm mortars and nine machine guns. The real anti-tank screen, however, was positioned behind the line of resistance and it was comprised of one 75/27mm medium field artillery gun and six 81mm mortars.

The first line of defense of Naqb Rala – facing the edge of the Qattara Depression – was the least fortified and was held by fewer than 130 soldiers, with three 47/32mm guns and mortar units. This infantry unit had purposely been positioned there by the battalion's commander to fend off a potential enemy assault from the rear. Its two thinly-manned strongholds, however, were somewhat counterbalanced by the rocky and rugged conformance of the terrain, which favored the defenders. The hilly terrain of Qaret el Himeimat – rising 700 feet above the desert – allowed the paratroopers to hold the high ground. Moreover, the attackers – in order to seize possession of the two strongholds – were forced to make their way up numerous hills and thus would have been completely exposed to machine gun fire.

As Lieutenant Colonel Rizzo recalled, the tactical procedure adopted to push back the French attack was based on the combined fire of well-concealed machine gun nests and well-dug-in mortar emplacements situated on both flanks of the Naqb Rala Plateau:

> Our defensive strategy had been developed over several weeks and no single detail had been overlooked. It was based upon the following concept: to block the enemy from reaching our positions by subjecting its assault units to fixed line machine gun fire. Secondly, our intent was to counterattack enemy units advancing from the south-east and the southern salient. The counterattack was to be executed in a timely manner once the enemy had advanced well into the Naqb Rala Plateau and the ground had been swept by machine gun fire. Once the enemy assault units had been trapped within the plateau, thus out of the view of Allied artillery, we would go on the offensive.[35]

The Allied preparations for this operation began 15 days prior to the start of Operation 'Lightfoot'. During this preparatory period, there had been a number of heated discussions between French General Marie-Pierre Koenig and the 13th Army Corps commander – Lieutenant General Brian Horrocks – regarding whether the operation was even feasible. General Koenig had argued that his troops had been assigned to take part in a high-risk operation. Not only did he lack an adequate number of heavy artillery and tanks to soften the enemy's defenses, but his troops were also to travel 15 kilometers during the long approach march to the front line. He feared

34 Ufficio Storico, V Battaglione Folgore: 'Relazione del comandante Giuseppe Izzo del V Battaglione sul combattimento del 23-24 ottobre 1942 sulle posizioni Munaqir El Dab'a', p.1.

35 Ibid., p.2.

that during the lengthy trip, the mobile infantry columns would offer an easy target for the Axis artillery or its air force. Moreover, Koenig argued that the enemy positions appeared to be well entrenched and heavily defended. General Horrocks countered that British Intelligence had revealed that these positions were held by less than 400 infantrymen and that the French would enjoy a three to one advantage in men during the attack. On 18 October, General Horrocks met with Koenig to finalize the plan of attack. He presented the French general with an ultimatum, by stating that if the French were unwilling to lead this operation, he would choose instead a British brigade. Ultimately, General Koenig was forced to concede and the final details of the operation were agreed upon.

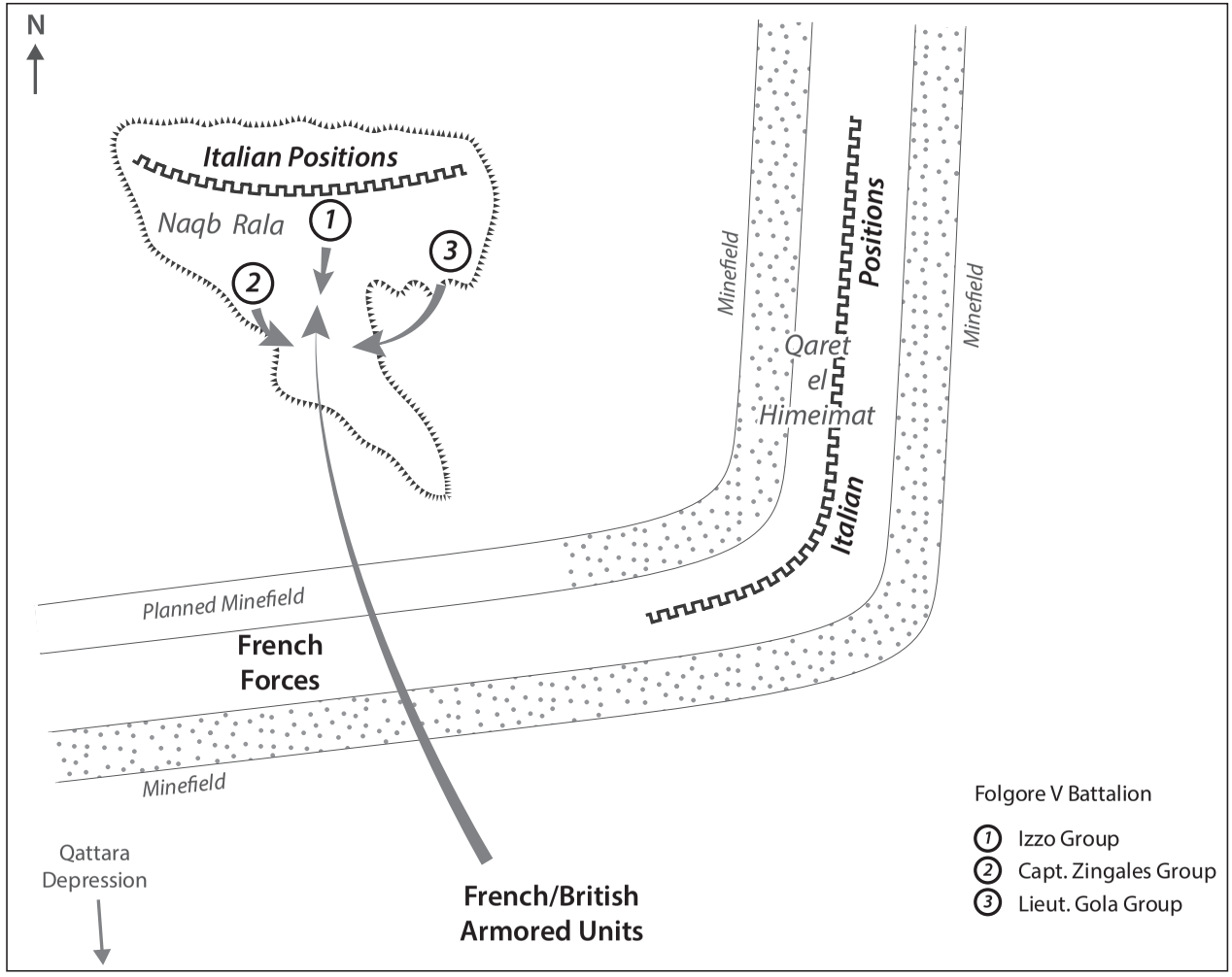
At approximately 1915 on 23 October, a force of approximately 1,300 men – comprised by the two (1st and 2nd) French Foreign Legion battalions – approached the southern flank of Naqb Rala (bypassing the minefield between Qaret el Himeimat and the Qattara Depression). The troops were deployed in four formations: the first unit, led by Lieutenant Colonel Dimitri Amilakvari – comprising the 32nd Brigade – was tasked with attacking the Naqb Rala fortifications from the southern edge facing the Qattara Depression. The second unit, comprising a tactical infantry battalion, was to remain in the assembly area of Qor er Laban – ready to intervene once the French Brigade had breached the Italian positions. The third unit, comprising the 1st French and the 3rd British Artillery Battalions – and a number of anti-tank and anti-aircraft units – was responsible for supporting the infantry attack with a pinpoint preparatory barrage. The fourth unit, comprised by French and British armored units, was to fight off any attempt by the German *Kiehl* armored group to interfere with the French infantry attack.

At 2030, a massive artillery barrage crashed down on the *Folgore's* positions. The shelling continued vigorously for two hours – demolishing the outer defenses, some machine gun nests and interrupting communications between the V Battalion command post and the *Folgore's* central headquarters. As a result of the widespread disruption caused by the heavy shelling, the V Battalion's commander was not able to dispatch in time the counter-battery fire of the Italian 75/27mm gun unit. As the Italian artillery could not intervene and the German *Flak* 88mm unit was moved to the northern sector unexpectedly a few hours before the battle, the defenders of Naqb Rala were, for the most part, left to fend for themselves with limited artillery support.

The only interdicting fire, in fact, was put down by the battalion's own mortar unit, which despite violent and overpowering enemy counter-battery fire, doggedly persisted in harassing the advancing French columns. The unit was able to score several hits, as several mortar rounds landed on the narrow access corridors leading to the Naqb Rala Plateau – causing significant harm to the French *legionnaires*.

Despite suffering their first casualties, the attackers continued their determined infantry charge toward the plateau. Once they reached its southern edge at 0230 – thus, in close proximity of the Italian forward firing points – the mortars could no longer be deployed in halting the enemy. At that distance, the risk of inflicting casualties by friendly fire was too great. As a result, the infantry was able to progress in its offensive operation with considerable forward momentum. At first, the French overran the initial Italian line of defense: an outpost comprised by 28 infantrymen and one machine gun emplacement, which was located at the bottom of the ramp on Naqb Rala. All of its defenders were either captured or killed, with the exception of the machine gun operator, who managed to flee to the main line with his gun.

As the French *legionnaires* then rushed the *Folgore's* firing points uphill, Lieutenant Colonel Izzo – having received no artillery support – reckoned that the only way to stop them was through a swift counter-attack. The men were rounded up and each was ordered to take as many hand grenades as possible. Initially, the French were allowed to advance well into the *Folgore's* defenses; however, by the time the French were in proximity of the Axis trenches, they found themselves caught in the open plain. Moreover, it was also very dark – and the French (which at this point,



Map 4.3 The Battle of El Alamein, Naqb Rala – 24 October 1942: This map shows the attack against the *Folgore* V Battalion – defending the advanced posts on Naqb Rala – by the Free French Brigade forces, which were supported by British armored units. The map also shows that the Allied forces attempted to outflank the main positions on Qaret el Himeimat by scaling the ramp leading to Naqb Rala. (Redrawn by George Anderson based upon the following original source: Mario Montanari, *Le Operazioni in Africa Settentrionale, v. 3* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1990))

had been surrounded) were not able to locate their enemies, which were hiding in their foxholes, behind *wadis*, or inside small caves and trenches in anticipation of the attack. The latter then surprised their opponents by attacking them in small groups and from different directions – using primarily hand grenades, Molotov cocktails and bayonets. These offensive thrusts were alternated with effective machine gun fire coming from the flanking positions, which piled more misery upon the French. Confronted with an unexpected counter-attack, the French infantry units began to lose steam and to retreat downhill.

At the same time, a smaller French unit had also begun its attack on the main enemy position from the opposite direction. They had reached it by climbing up from the south-eastern edge – thus outflanking the main machine gun strongpoint. In the process, they had successfully overrun two small outposts – killing several infantrymen. This French group was soon after on the verge of attacking from behind the main Axis position, when it was met by a makeshift artillery unit led by Lieutenant Marco Gola. The latter – realizing that his mortars were no longer of use, with the enemy at such a close range – had instructed his unit to abandon their weapons in order to deliver a counter-attack from the flank.

The judiciously-timed initiative had the desired effect, as it sealed off the French unit and ultimately pushed it back:

> The counterattack, recalled the V Battalion's war diary, turned into a series of small isolated clashes with the enemy. Small groups of paratroopers, composed of three or four soldiers, acting autonomously and picking their targets at random, concentrated their fire upon the advancing French troops. Once groups of enemy infantry were at close range, these small units would leap out and attack them mainly with hand grenades.[36]

The French assault had come up against stiff resistance, but it had also been hampered by a lack of co-ordination due to persistent communication problems. During the infantry charge, radio transmission between Lieutenant Colonel Amilakvari, French Headquarters and the combined command post of the British and French artillery units in the rear had broken down. The interruption led to a highly disjointed – and ultimately not successful – operation, as the infantry was not able to receive the required supporting fire. Moreover, the French had also faced great difficulties in bringing up to the plateau their small field guns due to a combination of soft sand and rocky terrain.

While the first offensive thrust had been thwarted, at approximately 0500, the French forces renewed their attack. Lieutenant Colonel Amilakvari ordered his *legionnaires* to regroup at the bottom of the hill, where reinforcements were also received. The French armored units were also dispatched and ordered to assemble at the edge of the plateau. From this position, they began to fire upon the Axis strongholds.

As the French forces began to make their way up the hill for a second time, its artillery shelled the Italian strongpoints on the plateau, as well as the artillery positions in the rear, in a bid to tie both down by neutralizing their crews – but sensing that the course of the battle had swung against the French, the commander of the V Battalion ordered another round of counter-attacks. The paratroops, accordingly, charged down the hill into the French assembly area by lodging against them hundreds of hand grenades. The latter – primarily the *Breda* model 35 and the OTO – were generally, and justifiably so, considered by the Allies to be too lightweight and not very effective. In this circumstance, however, they proved effective because of their specific deployment. In such close combat conditions, their relatively light weight enabled each

36 Ibid., p.3.

defender to carry and lodge many of them during the pursuit. The counter-move, covered by light machine gun fire, came at the French from three different directions. In the middle, the main *Folgore* group advanced against the French from the main path, while two smaller groups pursued the enemy from the flanks. Captain Gola – who fell mortally wounded during this encounter, and was later awarded a Gold Medal for military valor – and his artillery servers attacked from the left flank, while Captain Zingales' unit made its way down the plateau by attacking from the opposite flank. The counter took the enemy by complete surprise, and its forward units – feeling the pressure – broke and scattered in different directions. The chase then turned into a rout, as the French line disintegrated and its infantry sustained heavy casualties during the pull-back.

Despite heavy losses – including injuries suffered by the battalion commander and the death of two other senior officers – the defenders of Naqb Rala were able to finally push back the French. The fight had lasted more than three hours, but by early morning, the numerous counter-attacks had re-established the original line of defense, as the *Folgore* Regiment war diary reported:

> The enemy was thrown off by the unexpected counter-attack coming from three different directions. During the retreat the French units put down heavy machine gun fire. But the paratroopers continued their pursuit by chasing the enemy downhill thus preventing enemy units from regrouping. In addition, the pressure exerted on our enemy had a further unintended effect which was to prevent him from realizing how exiguous our forces really were.[37]

Accordingly, the second French attempt to storm Naqb Rala was also unsuccessful. Once again, because of poor co-ordination between the attacking platoons and the artillery, the infantry fell into a trap – ending up being raked by the machine guns units and subjected to heavy hand grenade fire.

French General Bernard Saint Hillier recalled:

> At 0600 we were counterattacked by the Folgore V Battalion. The enemy blow was fierce and it led to hand to hand combat. Both sides had many casualties. We managed to hold them off for an hour approximately. By 0700 we had run out of ammunition and we pulled back from the plateau. In the meantime we had lost most of our transport vehicles due to enemy artillery shelling. Thus we were forced to pull back and had to hand tow our 75 mm artillery pieces under heavy enemy fire.[38]

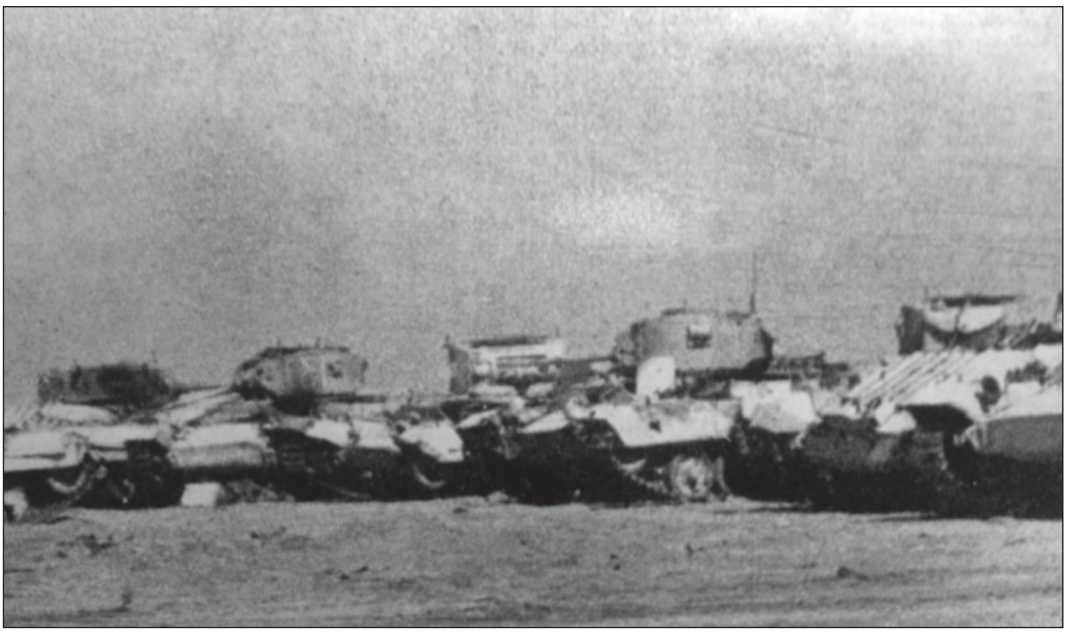
The French official military history account of the battle mistakenly attributes the failure to break the Italian positions on the edge of the Qattara Depression to the intervention of German armored units: 'At 0700 hours the AA.33 (i.e., Khiel Group) German armored group counter-attacked the foreign legion battalion with five armored vehicles. The tanks pushed back the French units. As a result, Lieutenant Colonel Amilakvari alerted General Koenig that he had been forced to abandon the offensive'.[39] The facts show, however, that the 33rd German Armored Group arrived on the battlefield after 0700, when the southern edge of the Naqb Rala position had already been cleared by the *Folgore's* second counter-attack.

37 Ibid., p.5.
38 Zambon, 'Operation Beresford', p.69.
39 Joan Noel Vincent, *Les Forces Francaises dans le Lutte Contre l'Axe en Afrique* (Vincennes, FHI, 1983), pp.208-209.

Captured French soldiers during the Battle of El Alamein. These are soldiers from the Free French Brigade that had taken part in the attack against the *Folgore* V Battalion. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Shortly after 0700, six German armored vehicles reached the plateau and deployed themselves next to one of the Italian 47mm anti-tank gun positions. The German armor stationed in this position for approximately 20 minutes to reconnaissance the battlefield. Shortly after 0730, the German armored vehicles outflanked and maneuvered past a number of British Crusader tanks, which were positioned in defense of the French infantry forces. They then began to pursue the French infantry, which by then, was fast retreating. While the French were crossing the minefield under intense enemy fire, Lieutenant Colonel Amilakvari was hit by a 47/32mm shell and died. By this time, with improved visibility and after communications had been re-established, the Italian artillery was also called into action. Together with the German armored unit, the 75/25mm gun and a number of mortars also began shelling the French forces and disrupting their retreat. Many of their soft-skinned vehicles were hit and set on fire – and as a result, the French infantry was forced to abandon many weapons on the battlefield.

The New Zealand official military history succinctly details the events of 24 October involving the French battalions:



Knocked-out British Valentine tanks.
(Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

> Initially this operation went well, the two bases being taken up and artillery disposed to cover the area, while the two mobile columns, against some resistance, reached a position to the west of Himeimat. Here, however, stiff fighting was necessary before enemy troops could be driven off the high ground, and by this time, through casualties and the rough going, the attack began to lose its punch. The enemy garrison on and around Himeimat was apparently unconcerned that it was being encircled, so that with the failure of 7th Armored Division's operation, the French were faced with determined opposition both on the north and east, and with artillery fire from the west.[40]

Of the 130 paratroopers that took part in the fighting in the Naqb Rala/Qaret el Himeimat sector, 80 died or were severely injured on the night of 23/24 October, while Lieutenant Colonel Izzo was later awarded the Silver Medal of Military Honor, with the following motivation: 'As battalion commander he calmly led his men during a difficult situation. He carried out a counter-attack at the head of his men which resulted in pushing back the enemy. Despite receiving serious injuries he remained at the head of his men until victory had been achieved'.[41]

According to Allied reports, the French losses amounted to approximately 190 soldiers – in addition to the loss of several vehicles and anti-tank guns. The 13th British Army Corps reported 190 French casualties, while the official account of the French brigade reported that 100 French soldiers had died during the fighting.[42]

40 Walker, *Official History*, p.286.
41 Paolo Caccia Dominioni, *Takfir (espiazione) Cronaca dell'ultima Battaglia di El Alamein* (Milan: Alfieri, 1946), p.321.
42 Montanari, *Le Operazioni*, p.748.

D) Summing up

Several factors determined the outcome of this engagement: first, the French battalions – by attacking in different waves, rather than all at once – did not use their superiority of men and weapons to their best advantage. During the course of the battle, they continued to deploy both assault and support units that manned anti-tank guns, mortars and machine guns separately. These set-piece formations were pushed back by the paratroopers, but it is likely that the latter – given their relative strength – would not have been able to achieve the same result if faced by a more determined mass assault. Had the French intervened in the fighting more cohesively, the thinly-held Italian positions could have been overwhelmed. At that point, the French attack could have progressed toward the peak of Qaret el Himeimat – and the only forces standing in its way would have been the field artillery and the remaining unit of the V Battalion. Second, another factor that facilitated the defenders of Naqb Rala was that the assault was conducted during the night, and the lack of visibility concealed to the French infantrymen how scant the Italian forces really were. It also allowed the Italians to ambush the French forward units in the dark as they reached the top of the plateau. Third, the French forces remained leaderless – losing their commander, who was struck by a grenade. The death of Amilakvari, even though it came toward the end of the battle, negatively impacted the morale of his troops. Fourth, by having control of the high ground, the Italians were able to submerge the French assault units with hundreds of hand grenades and plenty of machine gun fire. As the French infantry units charged uphill, they found themselves in an exposed position – swept by enemy fire.

Folgore soldiers emerging from the dugout at El Alamein; note how the uniforms and the helmets differ from the photos taken in Italy, where the unit was wearing a camouflage uniform. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Folgore artillery in North Africa. The *Folgore* utilized the 47/32 anti-tank gun; one of the reasons for this was that the gun was fairly lightweight and, along with ammunition, could be dropped in separate loads and by means of parachutes. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

A *Folgore* anti-tank gun destroyed during the Battle of El Alamein. It appears that the 47/32 anti-tank gun was overrun by an armored vehicle. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

A *Folgore* sentry at El Alamein. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

24 October

Overall, for the Allies, the results of the first night of operations in the southern sector were not satisfactory. Both armor and infantry had been deployed, but a breakthrough on the El Alamein line had not been achieved. Montgomery's orders to the 13th Army Corps were to renew the attack with a larger infantry deployment on the night of 24/25 October. The attack was to be conducted once again against the Axis' advanced positions on Post 105. The focus of the infantry would be again on eliminating the anti-tank gun screen and thereby facilitate the advance by the armor.

On the Axis side, the main concerns on 24 October were related to bringing up to the front line much-needed reinforcements and ammunition. In particular, the challenge was how to effectively resupply the forward positions on Post 105, which were under the constant threat of Royal Air Force activity.

The night of 23/24 October had been one of fierce fighting, with heavy losses on both sides, as Paolo Caccia Dominioni – commanding officer of XXXI *Guastatori* – recalled: 'On the morning of 24 October we looked from our positions into no man's land and noticed that the terrain was covered with dead soldiers'.[43] A paratrooper noted that there were 'dead bodies scattered everywhere, many weapons had been abandoned, two of our anti-tank gunners were dead, their bodies were leaning on a 47/32mm piece. It looked like they were posing for a photograph'.[44]

43 Dominioni (ed.), *Le Trecento*, p.38.
44 Migliavacca, *La Folgore*, p.63.

A) Artillery and aerial bombardments

At 0700 on 24 October, during a lull in the fighting, the Italian artillery units were called into action to alleviate the pressure against the advanced positions on Posts 105 and 103. The artillery – especially the units positioned on the top of Himeimat – had a commanding view of the battlefield, and from their posts kept both the British infantry and its armored units under their direct observation for the whole day. As vast areas of the battlefield – especially around the gaps and the main bridgeheads – were congested with tanks, mobile Bren carriers, vehicles of all kinds and dug-in infantry units, they came under the fire of the Axis artillery. The guns kept shelling the minefield gaps at a steady rate for most of the morning. British recollections of the artillery barrage mention that it was a harrowing experience due to the lack of proper defenses, with the infantry units scattered in the open desert, but there are no records – either Italian/German or British – that detail the losses that were sustained by the 13th Army Corps, or how many Axis shells were fired during the morning of 24 October.

The *Folgore* war diary reports that:

> The commanders of the two Parachute Regiments, flanking the outposts held by *Ruspoli* Group, on the morning of 24 October activated their anti-tank gun units and the heavy artillery. Their objective was to keep the pressure on the enemy's armored vehicles so that the forward positioned unit could regroup. The enemy tanks were stationed in front of the main positions and were very visible from the observation posts. By midday communications between the various defensive units were restored and this allowed for additional artillery units to join in the action. This concerted artillery barrage not only allowed us to maintain the pressure on the enemy, but it also produced good results as several tanks were hit and set on fire.[45]

On the British side, the 7th Armored Division recalled that: 'Being in full view of the enemy in daylight, the bridgehead drew a lot of shellfire, in fact one of the heaviest and most prolonged periods of artillery fire which the Regiment experienced'.[46]

A report – issued on the morning of 24 October by *Deutsches Afrika-Korps* Command – confirmed that the British night attack in the southern sector had succeeded in creating a bridgehead beyond 'January', but it had failed to break through the resistance line of the Italian X Army Corps. It underlined that some of the *Folgore* Division's firing points had been silenced and that up to 170 armored vehicles could be seen between the inner and outer mine-belts:

> 24 October, 0745 hours. 21st Panzer Division reports the situation in the southern sector to be as follows: AA 33 unit has successfully repulsed the attack on the south-west edge of Himeimat. The enemy has penetrated within our defenses to the north of Himeimat. On Post 103 up to 130 armored vehicles are exerting pressure on the X Army Corps. The tank columns can now be seen advancing toward Post 105. The artillery has already started to engage the enemy by firing against those tanks that have penetrated the minefield. An additional 40 enemy tanks have also been spotted on the eastern edge of the minefields. The 21st Panzer Division commander is currently surveying the battlefield to obtain a more accurate assessment of the current situation facing the X Army Corps.[47]

45 Ufficio Storico: 187 Reggimento Folgore: Bechi Luserna, p.5.
46 Robin Neillands, *The Desert Rats: 7th Armored Division* (London: Weldenfield and Nicolson, 2005), pp.153.
47 Quoted in Daniele Sanna, *Il Caos dei Comandi. L'Afrika Korps e gli Italiani a El Alamein* (Milan: Mursia, 2013), p.52.

During the early hours of 24 October, General Stumme's Command Staff had first maintained that the British effort in the southern sector was purely diversionary. This opinion was later modified as a result of the following report by the commander of 21st *Panzer* Division:

> 0845 hours. 21st Panzer Division has completed its field survey in the southern sector. Currently 80 British tanks are stationed at Post 103 between the two minefields. But it's uncertain at this time in which direction their attack will develop. DAK Command has already instructed the artillery to intervene against the armored units with Flak 88 guns and other anti-tank guns….
>
> The enemy has penetrated Post 103 and is currently trying to form a bridgehead in order to advance north. *Folgore* Division is still holding on to its main firing points both to the south and north of Post 103. The X Army Corps is now gearing up for the counter-attack with support from DAK and armored units from the 21st Panzer Division.[48]

Therefore, as Stumme's command became aware that the forward firing points of the *Folgore* Division had been overwhelmed and that up to 170 enemy tanks were stationed in-between the resistance and the security zone, it became convinced that the British really aimed at achieving a breakthrough in the southern sector as well.

During most of the day on 24 October, the Royal Air Force intervened heavily in the fighting by conducting a number of bombing raids over the Axis defensive positions. On one bombing mission, the British were able to destroy seven German tanks in the vicinity of the Naqb Rala Plateau in one fell swoop. Since the Axis air forces did not have the wherewithal to properly confront the Desert Air Force – comprised of 736 aircraft (of which, 420 were fighter planes) – they limited themselves to a few innocuous reconnaissance missions.

Deir el Munassib: this was one of the positions defended by the *Folgore* during the Battle of El Alamein. The vital position in the Axis defensive line was attacked twice by the British Army. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

48 Quoted in Sanna, *Il Caos dei Comandi*, p.52.

A *Folgore* infantryman sentry in North Africa, summer 1942; the unit was sent as a reinforcement, where the under-strength Italian infantry units were being attacked regularly by the Eighth Army. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

An Italian strongpoint at Deir el Munassib.
(Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

B) The Axis counter-attack: Posts 103 and 115

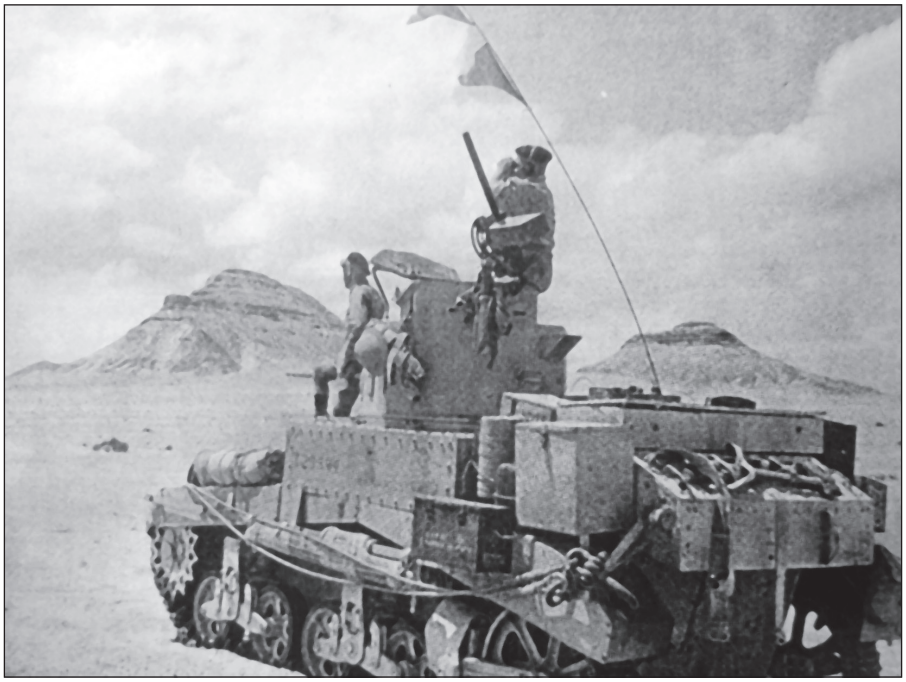
During the late afternoon of 24 October, the Italian X Army Corps reinforced the forward strongholds by bringing up to the outer perimeter of the resistance zone the XXXI *Guastatori* Battalion – that was deployed on the left flank of *Ruspoli* Group – and infantry attachments from the *Pavia* Division. Both units were deployed to plug the hole caused by the huge losses sustained during the first night of fighting, with the resultant loss of Posts 115 and 103, but the most pressing issue for the Axis forces was to re-establish a continuous line of defense in the security zone. A counter-attack was then attempted by two infantry companies (6th and 8th) of the 28th Regiment (*Pavia* Division); by a smattering of paratroopers from *Ruspoli* Group (mostly from 20th and 22nd Company); and by five German *Panzerjäger* tanks to seal the defenses and to prevent further enemy encroachments. The hasty operation, however, was conducted without any co-ordination between the infantry and the armor – and not surprisingly, it obtained few results. The latter, after arriving with some delay to the assembly point, proceeded to attack several British armored units on the southern edge of the minefields and pushed them back by a few hundred yards. As the British responded by unleashing on the German tanks an intensive anti-tank gun fire, the Germans began to pull back. During the hasty retreat, the armored units unintentionally ran over the commander and an officer (Captain Felice Loffredo and Lieutenant Ghignone) of the 22nd Company as they were moving forward for the counter-attack. The Axis infantry, meanwhile, initially came under heavy enemy fire as it was still assembling in the trenches in anticipation of the counter. Further casualties were sustained during its advance from the resistance zone to the advanced posts held by the 20th Company; in fact, as soon as the British noticed considerable movement – with infantry units moving forward into the advanced firing points – they quickly opened fire. The first group that emerged from the trenches, led by Lieutenant Colonel Ruspoli, ran straight into this deadly hail of fire coming from machine gun posts situated directly in front of their position. Eleven infantrymen died almost immediately; however, the enemy could not prevent a larger unit from dashing over the area – swept by intense machine gun fire – from taking up positions in the security zone. *Pavia* infantrymen and some of the paratroopers then proceeded to clear (with bayonets and hand grenades) a number of these advanced trenches that had been occupied by sparse enemy patrol units – thus, a series of small infantry clashes occurred in a bid to reoccupy Posts 103 and 115. After also suffering some additional losses from hostile shelling, the Italian infantry units were surrounded by British armored units.

The *Pavia* Regiment's war diary records that they initially put up a fight:

> But it soon became apparent that these infantrymen had fought their way through into the middle of an enemy armored unit assembly area. After they were spotted, a number of tanks proceeded to drive toward their positions. As a result a violent barrage made up of anti-tank guns and automatics fire ensued in a bid by the infantry to halt the tank advance. But by the time the Pavia infantry opened fire it was already too late as the enemy tanks had encircled the two companies and their position was already badly compromised. The fighting continued for a while longer but ultimately both companies were forced to surrender after having suffered heavy casualties…. A battlefield reconnaissance conducted the following day during a lull in the fighting revealed that there were numerous dead bodies of both paratroopers and infantrymen scattered in the trenches on Post 115. This was a strong indication that fierce fighting had occurred on the prior night and that only after an unequal struggle did the surviving defenders surrender their weapons to the enemy armored unit.[49]

49 Ufficio Storico, Divisione Pavia: Roberto Mango, Comandante del 28 Reggimento di fanteria Pavia, 'Diario Storico Divisione Pavia dal 13 ottobre al 24 novembre 1942', p.2.

A *Folgore* artillery soldier in North Africa; note the *alpini* hat. The vast majority of the soldiers comprising the *Folgore* 185th Regiment artillery unit came from the *alpini*. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)



A British M3 Stuart/Honey light tank during the Battle of El Alamein. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

A knocked-out Valentine tank in North Africa. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

A knocked-out British M3 Grant during the Battle of El Alamein.
(Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Captured *Folgore* soldiers during the Battle of El Alamein.
(Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

The counter-attack was, for the most part, unsuccessful – but it allowed the units the time for a re-organization of their defenses in the middle sector of the front line (Post 105), where the British had exerted the strongest pressure. The *Folgore* Division diary remarks that:

> Taking advantage of the lull in the fighting during the evening of 24 October, units of the Folgore and Pavia infantry attachments launched a counter-attack. After stiff fighting, these units were able to retake some advanced firing points. We were then able to reconstitute our defensive line, especially in that center bulge by re-linking the two main regimental strongpoints that the enemy had threatened to sever. Folgore's Lieutenant Colonel Marescotti Ruspoli valiantly fell in the midst of this operation.[50]

The VIII *Guastatori* and three infantry companies from the *Pavia* had, by then, taken up their defensive positions on the left of *Ruspoli* Group. The infantry units, in particular, were able to buttress the positions with heavy equipment – including six machine guns and numerous flamethrowers.

50 Ufficio Storico, 187 Reggimento Folgore: Bechi Luserna, p.7.

The night of 24/25 October

A) The renewed attempt to take Post 105 by the 131st Brigade

The prior night's attack against the center of the Italian defenses (Post 105) had resulted in the breaching of the first minefield and the subsequent creation of a bridgehead just beyond 'January'. At a meeting held on the afternoon of 24 October at 13th Army Corps Headquarters, Major General John Harding – the commander of 7th Armored Division – decided to probe these defenses for a second time with the remaining two battalions of the 131st Brigade of the Queen's Royal Surrey Regiment, supported by armored units. The brigade's objective was to attack the enemy positions situated behind the second minefield and clear the anti-tank screen and the machine gun posts. Once these positions had been dealt with, the armor would be able to advance and envelop the entire defensive line. This probe – coming on the heels of the prior night's operations – would allow the British to maintain the initiative and deny the enemy the time to re-organize their defenses by deploying a new anti-tank gun screen.

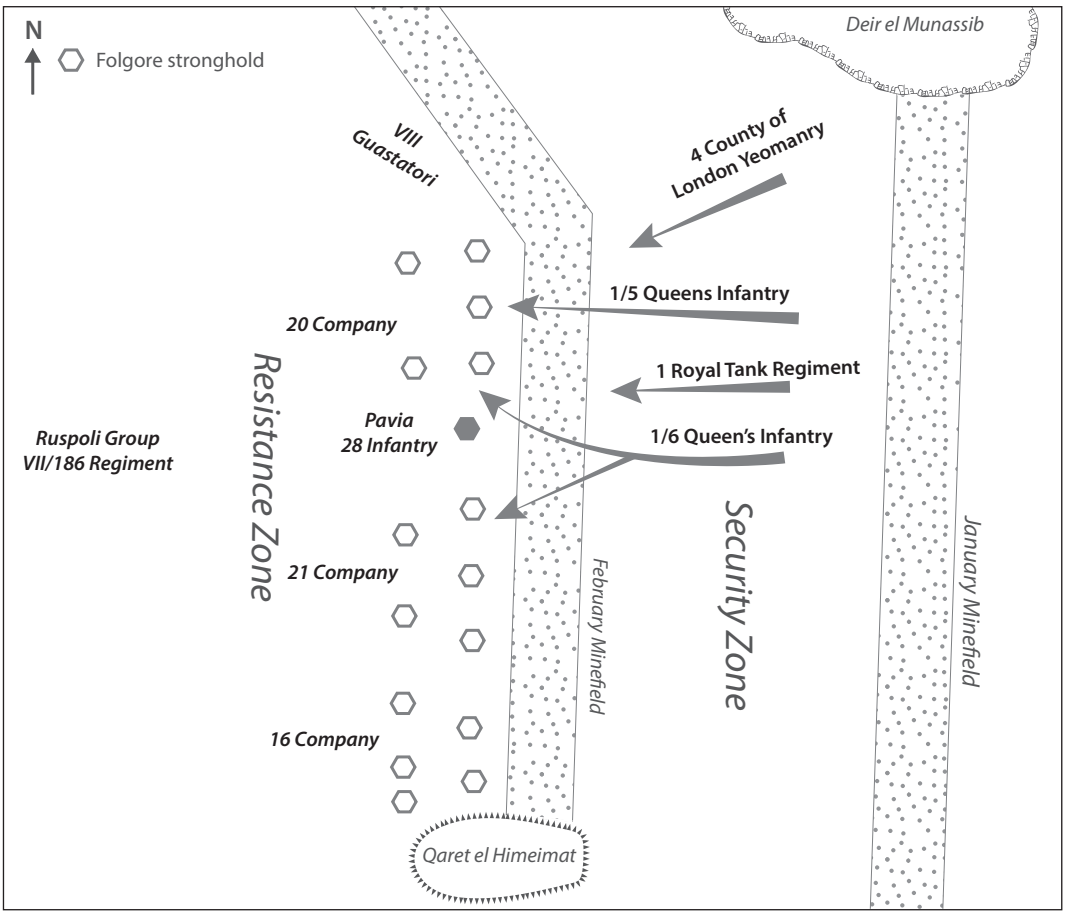
As night fell on 24 October, the offensive operations were promptly resumed. Accordingly, two battalions (5th and 6th Queen's) of the 131st Brigade were tasked to crack the *Folgore's* firing points in the resistance zone and create two bridgeheads beyond 'February'. It was envisioned that the infantry attack would go in first, along with sapper units from 'I' Company of the 1st Rifle Brigade. They were to be followed by an armored convoy of County of London Yeomanry and the 1st Royal Tank Regiment. The effort was also to be supported by an artillery screen purposely concentrated on the anti-tank gun emplacements situated on left flank of the assaulting forces. Finally, the 132nd Infantry Brigade – stationed a mile and a half behind the attacking formation – would be deployed once the enemy's positions had been breached.

The strongholds behind the 'February' minefield were defended by approximately 450 soldiers deployed in two parallel trenches – facing an attacking force of approximately 1,500 soldiers, 40 tanks and several lighter armored vehicles. Each company held five firing points – three of which were right behind the minefield and two in the rear. The Italian infantry unit, in fact, included the remains of *Ruspoli* Group – mainly the 20th and 21st Companies of the VII Battalion (186th Regiment) reinforced by some 100 infantrymen of the II Battalion of the 28th *Pavia* Infantry and VIII *Guastatori*. It could also count on five 47/32mm anti-tank guns, two mortars and two 100/17mm artillery guns which had been moved upfront earlier in the day in anticipation of the enemy assault. During the previous night, the 47/32mm guns of the 22nd Company had performed poorly while dueling the armor (in what had been an unequal struggle). As a result, the commander of the 21st Company had requested that the two heavier guns of 100/17mm be moved up the front line to better fend off a renewed armored attack.

The fighting on the night of 24/25 October would, in fact, follow the same pattern of the previous night: a blanket of artillery fire would again invest the Axis positions as the prelude to a combined arms attack; then infantry and armor would storm in to breach the defenses.

At 2015, the British activated all of their field artillery guns and put down a heavy barrage. At first, the artillery implemented a rolling barrage – pounding each infantry position multiple times. This was followed by a concentration on known paratrooper positions, which in turn, was followed by counter-battery fire. After an hour of heavy pounding, the artillery barrage was then halted to make way for the infantry assault. The British 5th Battalion was deployed on the right flank, while the 6th was on the left. At 2015, both battalions began their approach march toward the 'February' minefield, while the aforementioned barrage kept the enemy from interfering with their advance.

Although the British counter-battery fire kept the Italian heavy guns quiet, the infantry battalions suffered their first casualties of the night from fixed-line fire. As the Axis machine guns went into action, while both British battalions were still busy negotiating passage within 'February's' intricate defenses, thousands of bullets plastered their leading units. The initiative was then taken



Map 4.4 The Battle of El Alamein, Post 105 – 24-25 October 1942: This map shows the direction of the combined arms attack against Post 105 on day two of the battle. The attack – led by 4th County of London Yeomanry, 1st Royal Tank Regiment and 131st Brigade – was aimed at overcoming the second minefield. Post 105 was held by *Ruspoli* Group. (Redrawn by George Anderson based upon the following original source: Mario Montanari, *Le Operazioni in Africa Settentrionale, v. 3* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1990))

up by the infantry's secondary lines, that at 2300, had managed to cross the minefield and were preparing to put forth their attack. Advancing on the left flank, the 6th Battalion came into contact with their opponents first by overrunning two of the three enemy forward firing points held by the 21st Company and one of the 20th Company. The defenders of these positions were quickly surrounded and many were killed or captured. The assault units then tried to progress and invade the next set of trenches behind the minefield, but they were halted by concentrated machine gun and mortar fire, which succeeded in holding down the attack. This defensive fire was followed up with a counter-attack by elements of the 20th Company, which were engaged in a wild fight of hand-to-hand combat, with high casualties on both sides. According to post-war recollections, the fighting here was reminiscent of the over the top bayonet charges of World War One, as both belligerents exchanged rifle fire and bayonet blows in close combat conditions in order to gain control of the contested ground. The costly counter-attack, which had claimed the life of two dozen infantrymen and caused severe injuries to several others – including the commander

of the unit, Captain Lombardini – halted any further enemy penetration into the resistance zone. Ultimately, the 6th Battalion was pushed back and forced to halt its advance on the edge of the resistance zone. The 5th Battalion, however, had an even tougher time from the onset, while advancing beyond 'February', as it was subjected to heavy machine gun fire from two nests – one of which was impenetrable (being wired all around by anti-personnel mines and situated in well-concealed positions on its right flank). Several unsuccessful attempts were made by the British battalion to silence them, and the whole battalion was later ordered to dig in, since it was impossible to advance any further. By this time, the 6th Battalion was also instructed to dig in while it was subjected to a heavy mortar barrage. At 0200, the infantry advance had been halted and the two battalions found the 'February' area 'swept by intense fire'.[51]

The failure of the infantry advance had been determined primarily by the fact that the defenders maintained overall control of the minefield. The gaps were slowly made, but given the degree of resistance encountered, they were very narrow. As a result, the paratroopers were still in control of multiple – and still active – flanking firing points, from which they were able to unleash their weapons. Rifle shots from well-placed snipers, combined with rapid bursts of machine gun fire from both flanks, invested the ground on which the infantry was advancing – causing heavy casualties.

The 6th Battalion had advanced against the positions held by the *Folgore's* 20th and 21st Companies. The commander of the 21st recalled that:

> The unit was deployed on the resistance line approximately three kilometers north of Qaret el Himeimat facing the British minefields. To the left of our position, at a distance of 150 meters, stood the 20th Company's outposts, while to the right at approximately 300 meters stood the VI Battalion….
>
> On the first night on 23 October I witnessed very intensive fighting as the 19th Company firing points had been surrounded by numerous tanks and most of its men were later killed or captured. Our anti-tank guns were firing continuously throughout the night but given the swiftness with which the tanks were advancing very few shots hit their targets….
>
> Our unit faced a determined enemy attack on the following night which began at 2100. On the left of the Company's strongpoint a number of tanks passed through the minefield gap quickly followed by infantry on foot. As the British troops made their way through the gap, all of our guns opened fire against them. They were also shelled by the two 100/17mm heavy artillery guns that had been dispatched to my unit early in the afternoon in anticipation of the night attack. The artillery interdiction fire, directed upon the vast area of the gap, was persistent and fairly accurate, while the rest of the ground was swept by heavy machine gun fire throughout the night. Eventually as the enemy infantry advanced past the gap, the bulk of its units proceeded to invest the two closest firing points and captured most of its occupants. The enemy then attempted repeatedly throughout the night to overtake the two flanking firing points. But all attempts were rebuffed with heavy casualties. During the morning we were in a better condition to determine how far into our defenses the enemy attack had progressed. It was determined that its assault units had managed to form a bridgehead within the Folgore's main line of defense. This bulge in our defenses was later dealt with primarily by mortar rounds which inflicted grave casualties upon the enemy. The enemy was then immobilized and forced to desist from advancing any further. After midday some of its units were forced to surrender and the wounded were taken to the hospital for medical treatment.[52]

51 Barton Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1966), p.684.

52 Ufficio Storico, 21 Compagnia Folgore: 'Relazione del capitano Bianchini, comandante della 21 Compagnia Folgore', p.1.

As the infantry units stalled in the night, Major General Harding decided once again to send the tanks into the two minefield gaps that by that time, had been created within February. At 0230 – in an atmosphere of dust and smoke – up to 40 tanks and armored vehicles rolled into the minefield gaps. They first encountered a thin anti-tank gun screen – comprised of a few guns and a flamethrower – manned by *soldato* Gerardo Lustrissini, who was responsible for guarding one of the gaps. The latter, in particular, initially put up a gallant fight by vomiting fire primarily at the vision slits and the ventilators – forcing one of the tanks off the gap – but as the fighting progressed, his position, along with the gun emplacements, were crushed and overrun and forced to succumb to the armored advance; however, once the tanks maneuvered past the minefield exits, the Italians became more aggressive by escalating their field artillery fire.

As a result, the armor was met with continually increasing fire from the combined force of one 81mm mortar, two 47/32mm guns and the two 100/17mm guns, which led to casualties:

> On the next night, recalls Lieutenant Neville Gillman of 4th County of London Yeomanry, we had orders to push on through the February field…. it's a bit dim after that. We followed what was left of the Queens, and there was no element of surprise now. When we got through the gap everything opened up on us from the flank and front; my searchlight and periscope were shot off, inches from my head, as we went through the gap. As I recall, we were through by about 1 am on the 25th. There were lots of mines and a ring of anti-tank guns awaiting us and one by one my squadron went off the air. In the end there was nothing moving, and suddenly the Colonel came on the air and said, 'Any tank which is still a runner pull out and come back.' We had been lying doggo between two knocked out tanks, but we started up and I said, 'driver reverse,' and as we started to move, everything opened up on us. That is when the shell came in that ended my career with the 7th Armored Division.[53]

British tanks came under fire from the strategically positioned anti-tank screen, which was situated in front and on the flanks of the two main gaps. These artillery units continued to pour fire on the armored columns as they slowly made their way through each gap. Their fire was concentrated especially upon the minefield exits, which were also peppered by smoke bombs and Very lights. The latter illuminated the battlefield – allowing the gunners to follow the movements of the tanks as they exited the minefield. The effect of the anti-tank fire was to create congestion in the areas of the gaps, as the first knocked-out tanks blocked the exits and forced the other units to veer off the lane and into scattered mines. As a result, 4th County of London Yeomanry suffered the biggest losses, as 26 of its tanks (mainly Grants and Crusaders) were knocked out of action and its commanding officer was killed. The 1st Royal Tank Regiment units – advancing in the second gap on the left of the British deployment – also suffered casualties (mainly from the well-sited 100/17mm guns). These had been positioned just to the left of the gaps – along the edge of the minefield – and their accurate fire knocked out five tanks: 'The February minefield was cleared but a wide bridgehead had not been secured and the tanks of 7th Armored and 22nd Armored Brigade were shot at by anti-tank guns nearby while trying to debouch. Thirty-one tanks were lost and the exits blocked'.[54]

53 Neillands, *The Desert Rats*, pp.153-154.
54 Maughan, *Tobruk*, p.684.

B) The fighting on Post 105 winds down

This second attempt to penetrate the resistance zone at Post 105 proved that the main obstacles to an armored advance were the narrowness of the minefield gaps – in conjunction with accurate and persistent anti-tank fire witnessed by the pile of immobilized tanks. A renewed attack could only take place after the artillery support had properly dealt with the anti-tank gun units. In fact, at approximately 0415 on 25 October, General Harding of the 7th Armored Division – who had followed the tank battle from close range – decided, in a bid to conserve the armor, to suspend the operation and directed 4th County of London Yeomanry to retreat east of 'January' and the 1st and 5th Royal Tanks to retreat between 'January' and 'February'.

The men of the Queen's Royal Regiment were unable to retreat and remained in the minefield. Queen's officer Watson recalled that the enemy:

> … proceeded to inflict heavy casualties on us, using mortars and machine guns, firing from entrenched positions. I remember young O'Connell, both legs severed by a mortar bomb, screaming for help and then his mother before he mercifully died. Major Capper, who led the advance, was hit and disappeared from sight, but called out deliriously at intervals during the day before he too fell quiet…[55]

The British infantry units replied to the mortar barrage by deploying a number of sharpshooters, that with very accurate sniping, caused several casualties (10 dead and 21 injured) to the 21st Company.

After a prolonged exchange of fire that produced heavy losses on both sides, a number of *Folgore* reconnaissance patrol units were sent into the minefield to conduct a counter-attack and clear the bridgeheads. Armed primarily with light automatics and hand grenades, these units were able to retake possession of the forward firing points of Post 105 by forcing the enemy to evacuate them. This counter also resulted in the capture of scattered groups of enemy soldiers (mainly from the 6th Battalion) and a total of three officers and 142 infantrymen were taken prisoner.[56] The patrol units also located a number of immobilized tanks, which were subsequently petrol-bombed during the night. As Walker asserts, by midday on 25 October 'on the Corps commander's advice, the armored commander then halted the whole operation'.[57]

The *Afrika Korps'* war diary noted that the integrity of Axis defenses had been severely degraded by the two days of continued fighting and that the counter-attacks – implemented to relieve the pressure on the infantry – had, for the most part, been only partly successful. The *Folgore* war diary reported that:

> During the night between 24-25 October, following a heavy artillery barrage, the enemy renewed its attack against the sector held by the VII Battalion. Both our artillery and infantry units promptly responded to this attack by hitting back at the enemy with considerable fire-power. As a result, the attack was halted by early morning and the enemy was forced to pull back its assault units that had managed during the night to penetrate within the resistance zone trenches held by the VII Battalion.[58]

55 Ronald Foster, *History of the Queen's Royal Regiment*, *Vol. 8: 1924-48* (London: Gale and Polden, 1953), p.172.
56 Latimer, *El Alamein*, p.227.
57 Walker, *Official History*, p.319.
58 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 1160/C/11: Verando, p.2.

On the British side, estimated losses for the night operation amounted to 350 soldiers[59] and 31 tanks.[60] On the Axis side, estimated losses were at 150 dead, 70 severely injured and more than 60 soldiers captured – the bulk of which came from the 20th and 21st Companies and the *Pavia* Infantry Division, which had all been heavily decimated.[61]

After the second day of fighting, it became apparent to the Axis forces that there would be no respite from General Montgomery's battle of attrition. The British combination of infantry assaults, artillery barrages and fairly persistent Royal Air Force bombing raids on the front lines aimed at achieving a major breakthrough of the Axis line; in fact, Montgomery's orders to his commanders were to continue to pursue the enemy through renewed attacks in both the northern and southern sector. With regards to 13th Army Corps, Montgomery's instructions were to focus its offensive efforts in seizing control of the Deir el Munassib positions.

C) Summing up

The clash had been largely determined by the counter-measures taken by the Axis Command in anticipation of the night operations. The prior day, the 22nd Company had been overrun due to its lack of divisional field guns operating in conjunction with the light anti-tank guns and the mortars. It is likely that if these counter-measures had not been taken, which entailed bolstering the positions with heavier artillery and fresh infantry units, the 20th and 21st Companies would have suffered the same fate of the 22nd. The only difference this time would have been that there were no defenses standing in-between the two companies and the rear of the Axis front line. The decision to move the two field artillery guns from the rear to the edge of the minefield in the resistance zone was decisive in halting the armored attack on its tracks. It was the concentrated fire of the anti-tank screen which prevented a major breakthrough on the night of 24/25 October.

25 October

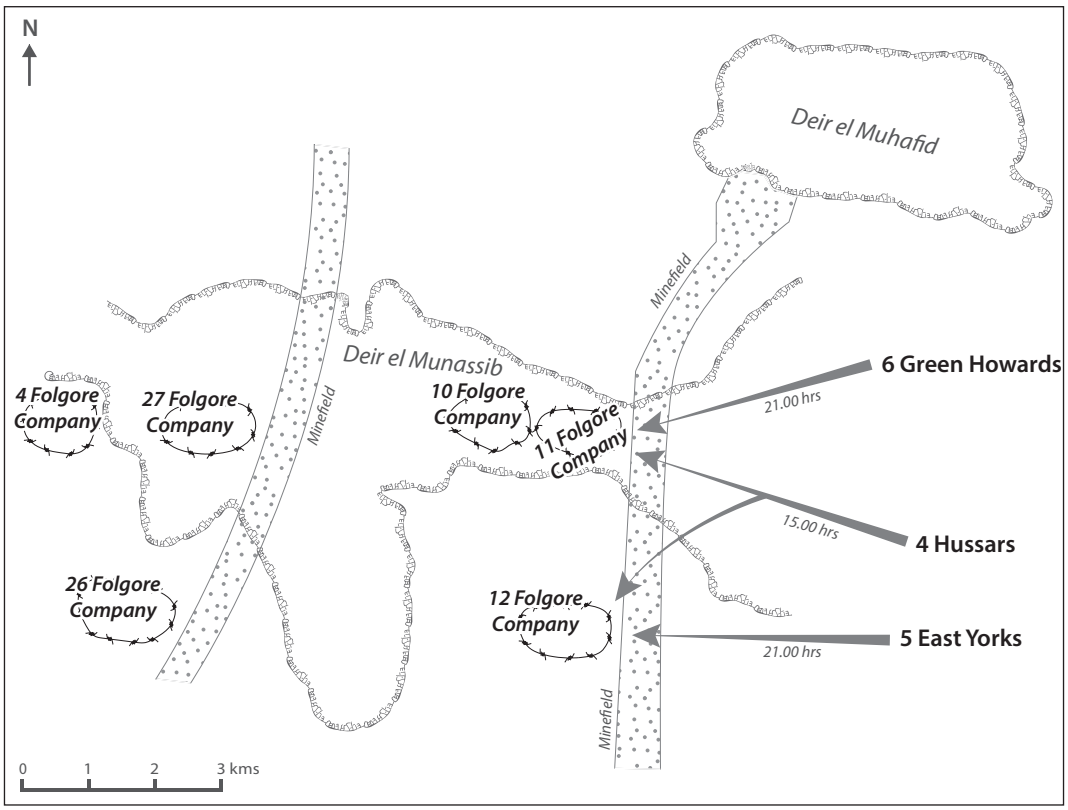
A) Tank attack against Deir el Munassib by the 4th Hussars

During the afternoon of 25 October, following the failed attack against the positions held by the 186th Regiment, the commander of the British 13th Army Corps planned a probe against the Deir el Munassib sector held by the 187th Regiment. The latter was deployed as follows: the IV Battalion manned the forward firing points in the so-called 'security zone' with its 10th, 11th and 12th Companies. Its primary role was to slow down the enemy attack by providing a first line of opposition. The IX Battalion stood in front of the 'February' minefield – manning a number of non-communicating strongholds in the resistance zone – while the II Battalion was positioned on lateral trenches along the northern edge of the depression.

The former's units – in particular, the 27th and 25th Companies – occupied the important position of Hill 101, as Lieutenant Colonel Camosso asserts:

> Our defensive positions were centered upon a number of isolated firing points surrounded by the minefields. Each point was manned by a single company. If one firing point was overrun, the enemy's advance had to be contained by the flanking firing points. Each company had to provide mutual support to its nearest neighboring companies…. The X Army Corps had

59 Walker, *Official History*, p.319.
60 Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, p.684.
61 Montanari, *Le Operazioni*, p.750.



Map 4.5 The Battle of El Alamein, Deir el Munassib – 25-26 October 1942: This map shows the attack against the troops of the 187th *Folgore* Regiment on Deir el Munassib. The attack was undertaken first by the 4th Hussars in the afternoon and later by the 6th Green Howards and the 5th East Yorkshire Regiment during the night. (Redrawn by George Anderson based upon the following original source: Mario Montanari, *Le Operazioni in Africa Settentrionale, v. 3* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1990))

> envisioned that infantry units would wear down the enemy's assault formations, while the tanks would only be unleashed toward the end of the battle.[62]

The British combined armored and infantry operation was executed in three successive stages: the first attempt was unexpectedly launched at 1500 and, as Verney asserts, '… in the afternoon of 25 October 4th/8th Hussars moved forward advancing northwestwards in support of operation by 50th Division…'[63] The goal was first to make a gap in the minefield in order to allow the tanks and armored vehicles of the 7th Armored Division to advance and roll up the Italian positions to the rear of Deir el Munassib. The operation began with the long approach drive toward the objective by 4th Hussars organized into three squads: the first squad ('A' Squadron) had 10 Stuart M3 light tanks; 'B' Squadron, which belonged to the 8th Hussars, but was fighting under 4th Armored,

62 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 16B: Camosso, p.3.
63 Verney, *The Desert Rats*, p.132.

also had 10 Stuart tanks; while 'C' Squadron had 10 Grant heavy tanks and an additional 10 light armored vehicles. The tanks were preceded by the sappers, which provided the first forcible thrust of the afternoon along the southern edge of the Munassib Depression. Their mission was to go in to silence the anti-tank screen, while deactivating the mines. A number of these units, accompanied by infantrymen manning rifles and machine guns, entered into the minefield and began to decommission the defensive framework. They were, however, met by intensive fire from the onset. The defensive effort was put forth mainly from the Italian soldiers located in forward foxholes, which emptied their rifles against the sappers. After having suffered a dozen casualties, the sappers were forced to scatter and retreat.

The decision was then made by the British commander to send in the tanks anyway – even if the minefield gaps had not been made. The British armored unit advanced, with the two squads of Stuart tanks in the front and the heavier Grant tanks in support in the rear. In the lopsided duel that ensued, the light equipment of the Italians proved no match for the enemy armor. Light armed infantry units, with mortars and guns, initially held their position, as the British tanks began to roll into their defensive perimeter. The anti-tank gun units fired their weapons at close range, but most of their grenades – even at close range – made little or no impact upon the enemy's armor. As the battle progressed, the defenders did (eventually) manage to score a few hits by firing grenades into the tracks of the tanks. At such a close range, the high-explosive grenades of the 47/32mm guns successfully immobilized two tanks; however, as the battle wore on and the tanks kept coming, these lightweight guns were overrun and their crews were either killed or captured – then at 1800, the armored vehicles (advancing under a thick smokescreen) made a number of breaching assaults against the frontline defenses. One unit drove north by advancing against the positions held by the 11th Company on Hills 92 and 94, while the second drove in the opposite direction by pitting itself against the 12th Company's strongpoints. Both infantry units had no more than 120 infantrymen and three anti-tank guns. The tanks began to freely maneuver within their defenses and were able to silence some of the firing points by smashing the fortified emplacements and machine gunning the infantrymen in their foxholes.

The following are the recollections of an infantryman of the *Folgore*'s 11th Company – describing how the British armored units surrounded the strongpoint:

> Enemy tanks had surrounded our positions and were driving around and over them. They were firing their machine guns at close range while barreling over our strongholds. If they were not able to kill by gunning us down with machine guns they would try to literally run our positions over and crush us under the weight of the tracks of the tanks…. Thanks to the deep tunnels that we had built around our stronghold some of us were able to hide in safety and avoid getting run over by the tanks.[64]

While the tanks had steamrolled most of the forward infantry's firing points and were on the verge of enveloping the whole resistance zone position at Hill 101, they came under fire once again by the heavy artillery. The 75/27mm and 100/17mm artillery pieces, in particular, which directed their fire with accuracy, forced the enemy tanks to halt their attack and to maneuver out on the flanks. As the tanks began to spread apart and drive around – thus exposing their more vulnerable sides – they became an even greater target of the armor-piercing shells of their enemies. The Axis artillery, situated on both flanks of the main strongholds in the resistance zone, increased the intensity of the barrage – leading to the destruction of several enemy units. Meanwhile, the paratroopers focused their machine gun fire on the crews escaping the smoldering vehicles.

64 Guilio Bedeschi, *Fronte d'Africa, c'ero anch'io* (Milano: Mursia,1979), p.101.

According to Italian records of the confrontation, the anti-tank gun screen debilitated a total of 22 tanks. The records also state that during the counter-attack later in the night, the immobilized hulls were subsequently petrol-bombed and that many of the crew members were captured. Although the Italian records do not give any information on whether these were, for the most part, light or medium-sized tanks, the figures reported partially coincide with the 4th Hussars' war diary. The latter states that the armored units began attacking the Italian position of Hill 101 on Deir el Munassib at 1615 and that during the initial stages of the battle, the armor was able to cause significant damage to the enemy's forward anti-gun screen – resulting in considerable casualties and damaged equipment; however, as the tanks closed in on the main anti-tank screen, 'A' Squadron lost 10 tanks, while 'B' Squadron lost five. The total casualties reported were the death of two officers and five soldiers, and severe injuries to nine soldiers.[65] Italian casualties amounted to approximately 50 – mostly from the 11th Company.

The following are the recollections of Lieutenants Bruno Bean and Stefano Lutman of the 12th Company manning the southern flank of Deir Manussib:

> Our artillery fire directed by Lieutenant Colonel Alberto Bechi Luserna was very effective. The lion's share of the tank hits were made by the 100/17mm and 75/27mm guns from the Pavia and Trieste Divisions which had been made available to the Folgore for the El Alamein battle. As the Folgore was armed with only the 47/32mm light anti-tank guns, we were in desperate need of heavy units that could penetrate enemy armor. These heavier divisional artillery units at a relative close range were able to pierce even the largest enemy tanks such as a Pivot. As a result of their deployment, several tanks were knocked out on that night resulting in a number of major explosions, huge flames and thick black smoke in front of our positions.[66]

The night of 25/26 October and 26 October

A) The night attack against Deir el Munassib by the Green Howards

Since the late-afternoon armored attack against the defenses of Deir el Munassib had stalled, the British decided to renew their offensive with an infantry assault during the night of 25/26 October. The plan for night operations included the main attack by the infantry units of the 69th Brigade, which was to be followed by a breaching assault by the 7th Armored Division. The first objective of the attack was the two *Folgore* positions of Hills 92 and 94 on Deir el Munassib, which the British referred to as the 'Moor' and the 'Cape' respectively. Once these positions had been dealt with, the attack would proceed to envelop the second line of defense (Hill 101), which was situated 300 yards behind the two firing points. It was also planned that once these positions had been cleared, the British infantry would hold them as an advanced springboard for future operations. This operation was, in essence, a repetition of Operation 'Braganza', as the objectives were virtually the same.

At 2000, a massive artillery barrage shelled the strongholds held by the 11th and 10th Companies upon the edge of Munassib. As recalled by Lieutenant Colonel Camosso, on the night of 25 October, a hail of fire fell on these forward positions – hitting each firing point multiple times. According to Lieutenant Colonel Bechi Luserna's report, the intensity of the artillery barrage was as severe as the one that opened up Operation 'Lightfoot', with more than 60,000 shells landing and reaping havoc in little more than an hour.

65 Qattara Study Group, 4th Hussars' war diary: < http://www.qattara.it/50-00%ussarsdiary.html> (accessed 4 January 2015).

66 Dominioni (ed.), *Le Trecento*, p.36.

This was followed at 2100 by the rapid advance of an infantry formation comprised of the 6th Green Howards, with 'B' Company on the left, and 'C' Company on the right (with 'A' Company and the mobile Bren carriers company in support). As the artillery barrage, asserts an infantryman of 11th Company, subsided:

> … we made our way toward the trenches. We were not able to see anything as our visibility was hampered by the huge black clouds produced by the smokescreen. I recall that all of a sudden one of the sentries emerged from his outpost and ran back toward the main trench. He was badly wounded but he alerted the platoon of the impending British attack. There were nine of us in the trench. The captain ordered six of us to start firing our Breda 38 machine guns, while the two remaining soldiers of the platoon were responsible for supplying us with the ammunition clips. The British ran toward us and tried to surround our firing point, but our machine guns kept them away. These valiant soldiers came in waves, one wave after the other. Each wave was cut down by our fire. But they continued to press on and eventually, as the night battle wore on, our guns were silenced…[67]

At 2230 – under the cover of a thick smokescreen – the British attack went in (infantry first), followed by a number of mobile units. The assault was facilitated by the British sappers' familiarity with the minefield, which they had originally laid down during the First Battle of El Alamein. As the infantry units got to the wire, it was probed in four sections, with ropes tied to grappling irons, which then pulled on the wire and set off a number of booby-traps. This clever engineering feat breached the defenses and facilitated a rapid advance, as within a few minutes, both infantrymen of 'B' and 'C' Companies – with their bayonets at the ready – were closing in on the *Folgore's* 11th Company's firing points. The latter began to fire at close range upon the advancing platoons and inflicted casualties – especially upon 'C' Company, which was forced to the ground. As it was pinned down, this unit was also subjected to heavy mortar fire, which further decimated its ranks. Despite numerous mortar rounds failing all around, 'C' Company's only platoon leader left on the battlefield rallied the men and renewed the assault. Initially, this unit made some progress in getting closer to its target, but at 2330, it was intercepted by two machine gun nests, which proceeded to inflict more heavy casualties. 'B' Company was originally held up by heavy machine gun fire, but its advance eventually made its way into the stronghold of Hill 94, where a bloody hand-to-hand combat battle ensued. At 0130, the assaulting units had managed to gain a foothold on the ridge by storming a number of firing points and taking prisoners. Not all of them though succumbed: two firing points continued to hit back with machine gun fire against numerous attempts made by the attackers to envelop them. Finally, as the British called up 'A' Company and the Bren carriers, the latter broke through and steamrolled over the few strongholds still held by 11th Company – capturing 35 prisoners. The fighting to seize control of this position had been particularly fierce, as the Green Howards' own official historical account attests: 'A great deal of hand to hand fighting took place, in the course of which the Green Howards sustained many casualties, including Captain Edwards, who was killed. The positions were, however, eventually taken, and some thirty-five prisoners, many of whom were badly wounded, were captured. Two anti-tank guns were also captured'[68] – thus, by the end of the night battle, the 11th Company had been whittled down to 35 survivors (having lost more than 100 infantrymen – including the unit's Captain Costantino Ruspoli).

67 Bedeschi, *Fronte d'Africa*, p.102.

68 William Synge, *The Story of the Green Howards: 1939-45* (Richmond; Yorkshire: The Green Howards, 1952), p.154.

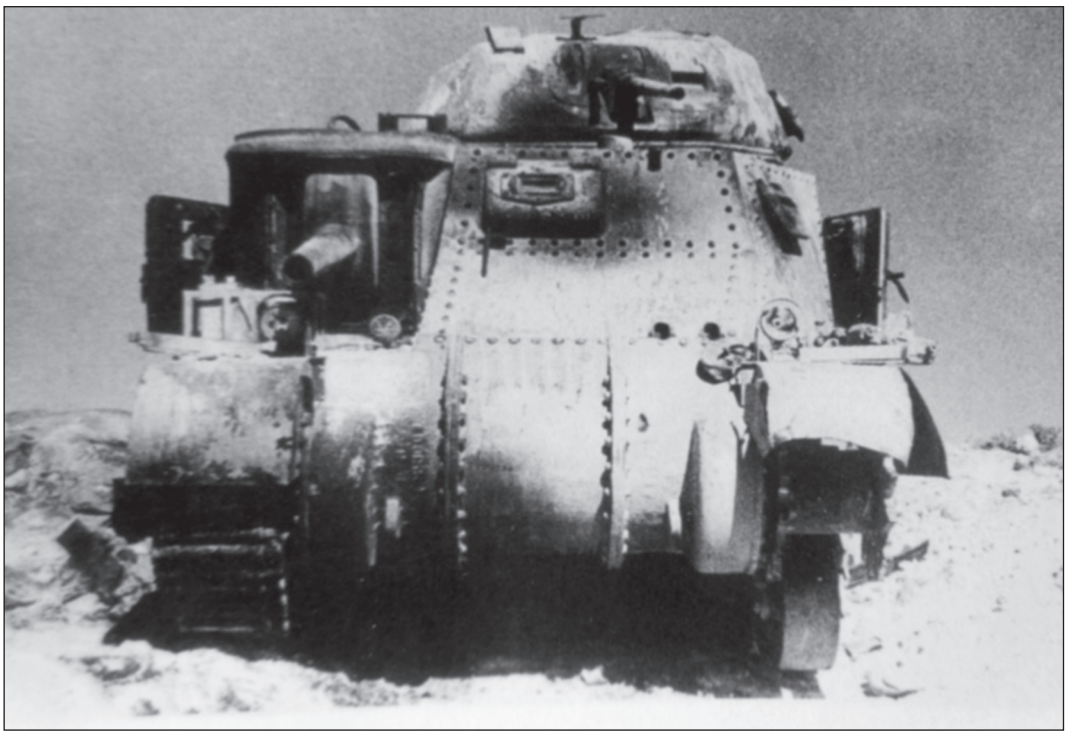
At approximately 0230 on 26 October, the Green Howards had secured Hill 94, with both 'A' and 'B' Companies occupying its positions, while 'C' Company was placed in reserve. A number of anti-tank guns and machine guns were brought forward to strengthen the battalion's hold on the newly-acquired position. On the Axis side, every effort was made to seal the breach. Initially, 30 infantrymen from the IV Battalion were called up to reinforce positions on Hill 101. Later on, an additional infantry company (the 25th) was also deployed in defense of Hill 92 – thus, even though the firing points of the 11th Company had been evacuated, a new defensive line had been established with a narrower front. The reinforcements were, in fact, concentrated on the two main strongpoints (Hills 92 and 101) overlooking the main access points of the depression. 'The 11th Company faced', as recorded in the 187th *Folgore* Regiment's diary:

> … a particularly fierce enemy assault. Enemy units under the cover of a smokescreen managed to infiltrate the stronghold. Its advanced firing points were quickly surrounded by infantry and rolled over by the armored units. These units crashed into the positions situated in the resistance zone leading to two hours of very intense fighting. One by one our anti-tank units ran out of ammunition and could not be re-supplied as they had been completely cut off from the other strong points. At that point, one by one our automatic weapons units were also put out of action by the tanks. At 0400 only a few firing points were still standing, while Captain Costantino Ruspoli had fallen, killed by machine gun fire…[69]

During the morning of 26 October, as the Axis defenders were believed to be low on ammunition, the commander of the Green Howards decided to renew the attack on Hill 92. The assault – planned for 1500 hours – was preceded by another artillery barrage, which began half an hour earlier. Suddenly, when the barrage began to relent, a thick mortar smokescreen was laid in front of the position. Under this cover, 'A' Company – supported by a number of machine gun and anti-tank sections – began advancing toward the objective, but as it attempted to storm the position, 'the enemy put down a tremendously heavy artillery concentration. The company now reduced to approximately a third of its original strength, and orders went out to Captain Walker to retire'.[70] As the attack began to lose impetus – due primarily to the hail of fire from concealed gun nests and artillery – the British infantry unit was pushed back further by a pincer movement. A well-timed counter-attack from both flanks led to bitter close combat, which ultimately halted 'A' Company in its tracks. This action was launched by elements of the 10th and 25th Companies – fighting mostly with hand grenades. They were deployed as two separate units advancing forward from both flanks – pushing back the enemy assault units, while gradually retaking control of the forward firing points. After having lost more than half of its force during the assault, Captain Walker was eventually forced to pull back his troops.[71]

The 187th Regiment's war diary reported that 'the prompt reaction of both officers and soldiers occupying the position along with the timely response of the artillery units had put an end to the attack. The enemy was repulsed with casualties',[72] while 'the 6th Green Howards' – reported the unit's official history – 'supported by covering fire from its sister unit, assaulted the enemy in the Munassib Depression…. Helped by only limited artillery fire, the Green Howards charged directly across the minefields to take nearly all of their objectives. It cost them half the men in the rifle companies'.[73] It

69 Ufficio Storico, 187 Reggimento Folgore: Bechi Luserna, p.6.
70 Synge, *The Story*, p.155.
71 Ibid., p.155.
72 Ufficio Storico, 187 Reggimento Folgore: Bechi Luserna, p.5.
73 Geoffrey Powell, *The History of the Green Howards: Three Hundred Years of Service* (London: Arms and Armour, 1992), p.106.



A Grant M3 tank: manufactured by the Americans and given to the British Army in North Africa. The tank in question was put out of action by an Italian anti-tank gun unit. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

is estimated that the Green Howards lost a total of 150 men,[74] while the two *Folgore* 10th and 25th Companies had lost more than 40 men; the 11th Company had been totally wiped out.

B) The night attack against Deir el Munassib by the East Yorkshire Regiment

While the Green Howards were busy attacking the 11th Company, the 5th East Yorkshires had been ordered to mount a night attack against positions on Deir el Munassib held by 12th Company of Captain Marco Cristofori. This unit was deployed on five well-camouflaged firing points, which were arranged in a spider web-like fashion. To the rear of these defensive positions, there were several trenches, where one company of the 185th *Artiglieria Paracadutisti* (70 soldiers) – manning three 47/32mm anti-tank guns and five mortars – had dug in (forming an artillery screen); the attack commenced just after 2200. Initially – under the cover of darkness – the British infantry was able to advance without suffering any losses. By 2300, the battalion had reached the wire – still without facing any enemy opposition. At the wire, some men of the battalion dug in, while others began to enter into the minefield. The latter then began to advance at a brisk pace toward the resistance zone. Since visibility was hampered by the darkness and the battalion's inexperienced commander had allowed his assault unit to advance too far into the enemy defenses, the Yorkshire infantrymen walked right into the trap. Without realizing that their opponents were lying in wait

74 Synge, *The Story*, p.156.

directly in their path, when the assault unit was at a distance of approximately 200 feet from their defenses, the paratroopers opened fire. Combined machine gun and rifle fire resulted in pushing back the assaulting units, while the 81mm mortars – firing high-capacity grenades at close range – proved instrumental in pinning down under a torrent of fire the bulk of the battalion's forces. Incidentally, the mortar fire was especially effective on that night thanks to measurements made with a British Barr & Stroud rangefinder, which had fallen in enemy hands during a night patrol on 12 October. Prior to the battle, all distances between the mortar emplacements and the wire had been minutely calculated so that in the middle of the battle, a hailstorm of mortar shells fell upon the men of the East Yorkshire Battalion. The bulk of its men were forced to take cover up close against the minefield, as the unit continued to lose more casualties as the night progressed: 'A further mishap was the breakdown of wireless communication between battalion headquarters and brigade, resulting in an officer having to be sent for instructions'.[75] After being subjected to heavy fire and faced with a breakdown in command, the East Yorkshire infantry units began to retreat – thus, in this sector, the assault did not progress beyond the security zone; by 0100, the enemy was repulsed after having suffered 150 casualties.

The night battle on 25 October on the Deir el Munassib is recalled by Captain Cristofori – commander of 12th Company:

> Both artillery and infantry units hid in the dugouts during the enemy's artillery barrage. As the artillery barrage began to weaken, we then took our positions in the frontline trenches. All efforts were made by my officers and I to restrain our troops from firing prematurely. In fact, we initially allowed the enemy's assault units to advance beyond the minefield and into our defenses. We then opened fire at the last moment when the enemy was at close range. As the enemy was in the process of moving toward the edge of our positions, its assault units were met by a hail of fire and we were able to inflict heavy casualties.[76]

The official history of the East Yorkshire Regiment recalls:

> The assault companies came up against very heavy cross-fire from small arms and heavy mortar fire: the 5th Battalion had difficulty in crossing a minefield and the enemy's barbed wire. Many casualties were sustained…. The attack on 'The Cape' had cost the unit a hundred casualties.[77]

The New Zealand official history of the war summarized the night operation succinctly by stating that:

> … on the right flank, 6th Battalion The Green Howards took part of its objective, together with 45 Folgore prisoners for a loss of 144 killed, wounded, or missing. On the left, 5th Battalion The East Yorkshire Regiment ran into trouble either from the supporting artillery fire or from the enemy, and with the loss of 106 men fell back before it reached its objective…'[78]

75 Paul Nightingale, *A History of the East Yorkshire Regiment in the War of 1939-45* (York and London: William Sessions Limited, 1952), p.118.
76 Qattara Study Group, Captain Cristofori war diary: <www.qattara.it/55-00%20cristofori.html> (accessed 23 May 2014).
77 Nightingale, *A History*, p.118.
78 Ronald Walker, *Official History*, p.329.

C) The French 2nd Brigade attack on Deir el Munassib

During the late afternoon of 26 October, a battalion from the 2nd French Brigade mounted a frontal attack against the positions on Deir el Munassib held by the 10th Company. The latter was deployed in defense of the second minefield on the outer perimeter of the Axis defenses. It held one of the most exposed and isolated strongpoints located on the northern edge of the *Folgore's* defenses. The attack was limited to an infantry assault with no armored support, but it was nevertheless conducted with superior forces. Initially, in order to stop the infantry advance, machine gun fire was put down as the French were approaching the Italian positions. Undeterred by the losses, the French continued to press their advance and managed to overrun with their sheer numbers two forward firing points by killing or capturing most of their defenders. The French then moved against the main strongpoint, but as they dashed toward the position, they were met by an intensive barrage by two mortar units and left on the battlefield more than a dozen casualties. Once the French were within 30 feet of the *Folgore's* strongpoint, the paratroopers then counter-attacked with hand grenades and forced them to retreat, with losses. The captain of the 10th Company, Gastone Simoni, fell mortally wounded during the counter, along with several other casualties. As the French retreated, they lost further casualties as a result of the mortar barrage. This was the last major offensive operation of 'Lightfoot' in the southern sector.

It appears that once the preliminary results of the attack began to filter in, General Harding decided to halt the operation. The commander of the 7th Armored Division initially intended to renew the operation on the evening of 26 October, following a preparatory artillery barrage

A *Folgore* mortar unit in North Africa, 1942. The 81mm mortar Model 35 was a smooth-bore, high-angle fire, *Stokes-Brandt*-type weapon. Remarkably similar in construction to the 81mm American M1, the Italian mortar was used as a standard infantry weapon. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

to 'silence the Italian anti-tank guns',[79] but eventually, the attack was called off. Despite strong attacks from both infantry and armor, the territorial gains had been very limited and the 7th Armored Division withdrew its armor east of the two minefields.

On the Axis side, Operation 'Lightfoot' had seen every British assault repelled, with losses. In addition, defensive success against the British had been obtained with little recourse to Axis armor, which had been successfully preserved for the final showdown which was to come in approximately a week's time. By the end of 26 October, the *Folgore's* officers claimed the destruction of 110 tanks and several armored vehicles.

On 26 October, a post-battle report issued by X Army Corps regarding the first days of fighting stated that the infantry morale was still good, while morale amongst the paratroopers, which had suffered heavy losses, was also still relatively high. Six days of defensive deployment and counter-attacks had reduced the *Folgore* to a shadow of its former self. It had suffered 1,000 casualties, and up to 500 troops captured by the enemy. Moreover, its officer and NCO ranks had been vastly depleted.

D) Summing up

The outcome of the fighting on the afternoon and night of 25/26 October was determined by several factors: with regards to the armored assault in the afternoon, some of the key issues were the timing of the attack and the fact that the British armored units were pitted against a well-functioning anti-tank artillery screen. First, the attack was conducted in the afternoon and in plain view of the defenders, which used their artillery to halt the tanks. The latter, initially, were able to put out of action several forwarded-positioned small anti-tank guns and machine guns, but when they attempted to overrun the main trenches, they were fired upon by the heavier artillery units – thus, the second factor that determined the outcome was that the anti-tank gun screen was still, in large part, operational. Not only had the British failed to implement a preparatory artillery barrage to nullify these units, they had also failed to bring up – during the armored attack – mobile artillery units to neutralize the threat of the anti-tank defense. As a result, with their defenses still intact – and with the artillery units well supplied – the Italians were able to hit back at the tanks and disperse them.

The key contribution made by the artillery regiment during the most perilous phases of the battle was underlined by the unit's own commander:

> Throughout the battle the artillery units remained vigilant by firing promptly and accurately especially against the enemy armor that had amassed in front of the positions of the VII and VIII Battalions. The Folgore's own artillery, on the other hand, made up of 47/32 units performed poorly even at close range. The guns' performance did not improve even after it was retrofitted with high explosive grenades distributed by the Northern Africa Command.[80]

The ineffectiveness of the Italian anti-tank gun at El Alamein was also underlined by Rommel, who stated that: 'The 47mm anti-tank guns, similarly to our 50mm, were not effective against British armor'.[81]

79 Barr, *Pendulum of War*, p.341.

80 Ufficio Storico, Divisione Folgore: Colonnello Ernesto Boffa, 'Relazione relativa agli avvenimenti della battaglia di El Alamein sul fronte della divisione dei paracadutisti Folgore con particolare riferimento al reggimento artiglieria Folgore, dall'inizio dei combattimenti fino alla cattura'.

81 Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p.318.

In regards to the night operations, the numerous counter-attacks that were executed to save the besieged positions of the 11th Company proved vital in finally repulsing the British infantry. The ground between the security zone and the resistance zone was heavily contested, but the timely counter-attacks prevented enemy infiltrations from reaching the second line of trenches in the resistance zone. Common infantry units, which were less adept than the paratroopers in conducting counter-attacks, might have buckled under the pressure of the enemy assault. The pressure on them would have mounted – especially after the tanks roared into the defenses. The paratroopers, on the other hand, continued to press the enemy with numerous counter-attacks – even when towards the end of the battle, it appeared as if their stronghold had been surrounded. The last counter-attack – conducted in defense of the last remaining stronghold still standing, with fresh reinforcements arriving just in time to take part in the action – finally halted the progression of valiant Allied assault units.

According to historian Niall Barr, the attempts by the 7th Armored Division to overcome the southern defenses failed due to the lack of additional resources that could have been thrown in during critical stages of the battle. Barr asserts that 'the attack was simply too limited to unlock the Axis defenses'[82] – and especially in light of the fact that the British artillery had not been able to silence the anti-tank guns. Barr does seem to have a point – especially in relation to the assault put forth by the Green Howards: perhaps with adequate reinforcements, this unit might have been able to take Deir el Munassib. The outcome of this important battle in the southern sector can be summarized as follows: '… the Axis units involved during six days of fierce combat had held their defensive positions…'[83]

During the course of World War Two – in most cases, when armor met lightly armed infantry units – the latter typically collapsed as soon as the tanks had penetrated their defensive positions. In Poland, France and Russia, and in Egypt and Libya in 1940-41, the armor had always prevailed; at El Alamein, the outcome turned out to be different. In this battle, the confrontation between armor and lightly armed infantry turned into a stalemate: first, since the men of the *Folgore* had, for the most part, ineffective anti-tank weapons, they were backed up by medium artillery units and based their defense upon the minefields. All of the firing points, the machine gun and anti-tank gun strongpoints and the defensive posts were located within the minefields. This enabled the defenders to slow down and wear down the amour, while preventing its infantry from submerging its firing points. Second, during the major battles in the southern sector, the paratroopers centered their defensive effort on firing the 47/32mm guns and the 81mm mortars against tanks and infantry, while the medium-sized artillery units focused their fire on the minefield gaps and on the columns of enemy tanks. When the enemy was able to open up large gaps and penetrate into the *Folgore's* defenses, they were dealt with by infantry counter-attacks, whose main aim was to disaggregate the armor from the infantry. The latter were first dealt with by machine gun and mortar fire, but once they were within 100 feet or so from the Axis firing points, they were typically counter-attacked primarily by infantry armed with hand grenades. Third, by resorting to frequent combinations of swift counter-attacks and heavy artillery fire, the infantry was able to push back the numerous attacks.

The infantry could do little to stop a massive armored attack without artillery support, but its contribution in repelling the armor should not be underestimated:

> For all practical purposes artillery fire and anti-tank mines brought about the vast majority of the casualties to enemy armor and personnel. But nevertheless the numerous counterattacks

82 Barr, *Pendulum of War*, p.341.
83 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 1160/C/11, Verando, p.22.

> conducted by the paratroopers were also relevant toward the final outcome of the battle. Throughout the Battle of El Alamein rarely was an enemy armored unit immobilized by a Molotov cocktail or a grenade. In most cases these devices would engulf the tank with fire but without causing serious damage to it. In most cases however, the flames would force the tank crews to retreat, even if temporarily, thus creating some bottlenecks and some degree of confusion amongst enemy ranks.[84]

Retreat from El Alamein

In the sector held by the Italian X Army Corps, British assault units and armored forces had gotten through the first minefield on the first night of operations, but were stopped in front of 'February' by both counter-attacks and defensive fire. On the second and third night of operations, the British forces attempted to breach the second minefield, but were prevented from doing so by heavy defensive fire. As a result of these unsuccessful attempts, which had also produced heavy casualties, General Montgomery ceased operations in the southern sector and concentrated the bulk of his troops in the north. The new plan – codenamed Operation 'Supercharge' – was launched toward the coast, and as a result, the last few days of October 1942 were relatively quiet on the Southern Front.

As a result of Montgomery's decision, operations in the southern sector were wound down:

> Until dusk on the 26th the enemy facing 13th Army Corps showed no signs of withdrawing or thinning out. Though his harassing fire was reduced, his reaction by artillery, mortars and small arms to any aggressive move by the corps was immediate and strong, while numerous tank patrols could be observed in the daytime watching the western side of the minefields. To 13th Corps' credit, its operations had so far succeeded in containing the enemy forces in the south.[85]

It can be argued that with Operation 'Lightfoot', the 13th Army Corps had obtained one of its goals: to tie down the Axis armor in the south, while it had failed in its most important goal, which consisted in breaching the Axis defensive line. General Montgomery would later state after the war that during 'Lightfoot', the operations in the southern sector were purely diversionary and were aimed exclusively at engaging (for as long as possible) the Axis armor – thus favoring a breakthrough in the north. At the onset of Operation 'Lightfoot', the British planned to effectuate two attacks on two very narrow sections of the El Alamein line. It also appears that if the attack planned against the *Folgore's* defenses in the southern sector had obtained a positive result, the British would have exploited the situation by encircling the Axis forces in the north. Moreover, the British deployment in the south – with more than 300 tanks and 10,000 infantry troops – was also very considerable, with enough firepower to exploit any immediate opportunity that would have presented itself to envelop the enemy.

On 27-28 October, British operations in the south were limited to artillery barrages and quick night-time raids by patrol units. As a result, the parachute losses were few, but a particularly fierce barrage on the afternoon of 27 October would claim the life of Major Francesco Vagliasindi – commander of the IV Battalion – and several others.

During 29-30 October, both armies were preoccupied with the digging of trenches, constructing parapets and salvaging as much equipment as possible from the prior days of fighting; then all of

84 Migliavacca, *La Folgore*, p.68.
85 Walker, *Official History*, pp.334-335.

An Italian infantry (*bersaglieri*) unit retreats on foot after the British have broken through at El Alamein. Unfortunately, Italian infantry divisions were not motorized and the majority of the infantry soldiers – during both offensive and defensive operations – were forced to move on foot. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

a sudden – on 2 November at 2000 – the X Army Corps commander 'issued a retreat order to his troops'.[86]

This order was the result of Field Marshal Rommel's decision to extricate the *Panzerarmee Afrika* following the Allied breakthrough in the north, but immediately thereafter, Hitler interfered with Rommel's command of the campaign by ordering:

> To Field Marshal Rommel. It is with trusting confidence in your leadership and the courage of the German-Italian troops under your command that the German people and I are following the heroic struggle in Egypt. In the situation which you find yourself there can be no other thought but to stand fast, yield not a yard of ground and throw every gun and every man into the battle. Considerable air force reinforcements are being sent to C-in-C South. The Duce and the Comando Supremo are also making the utmost efforts to send you the means to continue the fight. Your enemy, despite his superiority, must also be at the end of his strength. It would not be the first time in history that a strong will has triumphed over the bigger battalions. As to your troops, you can show them no other road than that to victory or death. Adolf Hitler.

Accordingly, Hitler's order to stand at all costs on the El Alamein line forced Rommel's hand, and for a few more days, the *Panzerarmee Afrika* continued to fight its futile defensive battle – but given the difficult situation facing the *Panzerarmee* on 5 November, both Hitler and Mussolini

86 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 1160/C/11: Verando, p.23.

eventually relented and authorized the pull-back from the El Alamein line; however, it was now too late for all the infantry units – and only the armored and motorized units were able to escape capture.

The infantry divisions of the X Army Corps (*Pavia*, *Brescia* and *Folgore*), by virtue of the fact that they manned the southernmost section of the El Alamein line, were forced to travel the furthest to reach the remaining forces of the *Panzerarmee Afrika*. Moreover, since they had no trucks, they were forced to conduct the retreat by foot. As a result, the *Folgore* Division began initially to retreat 20 miles west to the positions on Hill 112 of Gabel Kalak on the night of 2 November. All of the heavy equipment, such as the anti-tank guns, mortars and machine guns, were either dragged or carried by hand, since the unit had no transports. The disengagement was conducted during the night in an orderly fashion. A rearguard was left on the front line to provide protection as the bulk of the division's battalions were retreating. This unit, however, was not engaged with the enemy, as the British troops initially failed to notice that the *Folgore* had abandoned its defensive positions.

During 3 November, the unit had completed its orderly retreat and had started to occupy and fortify its new positions. On that same night, British units began to amass in front of the *Folgore's* new defensive line, which by then, was also shelled repeatedly. According to Captain Verando: 'On the morning of 4 November we were ordered by X Army Corps to resist at all costs on the new defensive line. Consequently, we focused all our efforts upon improving our defenses';[87] then unexpectedly, on the night of 4 November, a new order was issued – calling all the X Army troops to abandon their positions and retreat to Fuka. The pull-back was conducted again during the night, but this time, the British armored units were very aggressive in trying to cut off and isolate the rearguard of the *Folgore's* marching columns.

As the unit retreated, its attempt to reach the bulk of Rommel's *Panzerarmee Afrika* was hampered by the following factors: first, the lack of trucks for the transportation of the troops and their equipment; second, the weight of the heavy equipment, such as the mortars and the guns, which had to be hand-towed – slowing down the pace of the retreat; third, the fact that the ammunitions also had to be transported by the infantrymen on foot, since all communications had been interrupted with the supply centers in the rear – thus, there was little hope of receiving new supplies and ammunition during the pull-back.

During the night on 4 November, the parachute units traveled a total of 28 miles; then, at 1100 on 5 November, the troops were deployed in a semi-circle in a defensive position to fend off any potential enemy attempt to overrun their position. At 1130, X Army Corps commander Edoardo Nebbia dispatched the following message to Italian Headquarters: 'We have reached Qubur Hamat, approximately 50 miles from Fuka. Supply our troops immediately with fuel, water and food provisions. My troops are without water and fuel. The majority are retreating on foot. Take note that the 150 vehicles that were promised to us have not yet arrived'.[88]

It is important to note that on 5 November, the three divisions of the X Army Corps were retreating individually and had not been able to communicate with each other for almost two days, given the distances that separated them. At 1430, General Nebbia – having received no response from headquarters – issued the following message:

> We are located at Qubur Shamata. British units have engaged our rearguard platoons. I urge to send us the requested supplies of food, water and fuel which we have asked for several times. We will proceed to retreat tonight. But if we do not receive our supplies we will be

87 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 1160/C/11: Verando, p.24.
88 Sanna, *Il Caos dei Comandi*, p.78.

> forced to abandon the few vehicles we have due to lack of fuel. Inform the German Army of our predicament since all communications have been interrupted.[89]

Since the Italian High Command in Libya did not have enough trucks at its disposal, the paratroopers and the whole of the X Army Corps had little or no hope of reaching Rommel's columns in the north. They were left to their fate.

Meanwhile – throughout the day – the British units continued to pursue their enemy, with numerous attempts by the armor and the Bren carriers to smash through the *Folgore's* defenses. All offensive probes were repelled, but at a very high cost. During the late afternoon, three trucks were able to avoid several aerial bombardments and to reach the *Folgore* Division – carrying a half-ration of food and a half-liter of water for each soldier. The retreat was then resumed at 1800 on 5 November and the troops traveled a further 50 miles in the desert – reaching El Daba during the night.

Abandoned in the desert with no vehicles, food or water, the remaining troops of the X Army Corps had no other choice but to surrender. The British 1st Armored Division surrounded the retreating units on the morning of 6 November, as they were approaching Fuka. Initially, the remnants of the *Folgore* put up some resistance – mainly with the 47/32 anti-tank guns and *Solothurn* rifles that they had been able to hand-tow. The remaining able troops formed a semi-circle on a plateau that was surrounded by several dunes. As several British Bren carriers surrounded the position, the paratroopers opened fire. The British then replied with their machine guns – killing one officer and several soldiers. The fighting was brief, however, since once the remaining stocks of ammunition were depleted, these units destroyed their weapons and then surrendered.

At 1100 on 6 November, all resistance had ceased and approximately 400 soldiers were captured, as one *Folgore* veteran remarked:

> How much better it would have been, then, to remain in the old line, well entrenched and with ammunition, food and water which, without transportation we were obliged to abandon…. The Folgore, Brescia, and Pavia were under tremendous and constant fire from the enemy as they made their painful way on foot through the desert, tormented by hunger and thirst. In the end, they, and even the undefeated Folgore had to give up.[90]

Conclusion

In the days of fierce fighting at El Alamein, the *Folgore* had lost between 1,000 to 1,100 paratroopers – either dead or severely injured – and had approximately 500 of its men captured by the enemy. Together, this represented more than a third of the total number of soldiers that had started the battle. Another sizeable portion of the division's remaining forces were captured as they tried to retreat back to the *Panzerarmee Afrika's* new line of defense between 2-6 November, while less than 600 were able to escape capture by reaching Fuka – thanks, in large part, to the few mobile units at the disposal of the division. During the battle, it had lost a total of 30 anti-tank guns, 15 mortars, 20 machine guns and a few of its lorries had also been destroyed.

Enemy losses are more difficult to estimate, but after having reviewed the various official histories of the military units involved, we can estimate a minimum of 1,700 dead, missing or heavily

89 Ibid., p.78.
90 Caccia Dominioni (ed.), *Le Trecento Ore*, p.233.

injured in the southern sector of the *Folgore* alone. In addition, the British lost approximately 100-110 tanks and an unspecified number of armored vehicles, Bren carriers etc.

The overall quality of Allied infantry and armored units deployed in the southern sector was generally high. Apart from a few inexperienced territorial infantry units, the 7th Armored Division, 1st Rifle Brigade and French Foreign Legion forces were very experienced and first-rate units.

The retreat order of 2 November came as a shock to the vast majority of the paratroopers, which, for the most part, were still focused on improving their defensive positions and were not aware of developments in the north. The following letter, written by Captain Cristofori, is indicative of their view of how the Battle of El Alamein had unfolded:

> The battle continues to unfold in our favor. We have seen no combat action for the past two days because the enemy, after the setbacks of 25 October, has refrained from attacking us. The outcome of the two battles that took place on the 25th is in our favor, witnessed by the high number of tanks that have been knocked out in front of our positions.[91]

Ultimately, other overriding factors – such as the clash of armor in the north – decided the fate of the North African campaign. The paratroopers had, nevertheless, put up a good fight in the south by holding their defensive line.

The Battle of El Alamein was a great British victory and a real turning point of the war – almost just as important as the fighting at Stalingrad on the Eastern Front. For the Axis forces, the political imperative of resisting at all costs on the El Alamein line severely limited their chances of winning the battle. Perhaps Kesselring's more cautious approach following the Battle of Gazala would have better served the Axis cause.

With regards to El Alamein, Kesselring would later write that:

> Events in any case did not justify the absolute confidence of Rommel and his deputy, Stumme, in the El Alamein position. Very possibly Rommel by a mobile strategy in a restricted area would have accomplished more than Stumme, who was unluckily killed the very morning of the day of the first attack was launched. All things considered, however, it would have been better to have retired behind a rearguard to a more easily defended position, for which the Halfaya Pass would have been suitable; or else, under pretence of offering the main resistance from the El Alamein line, to have accepted the decisive battle some twenty miles further west in an area – the so-called Fuka position – which had all the advantages of the El Alamein zone and was better protected on the left wing by the terrain.[92]

91 Qattara Study Group: Marco Cristofori, letter dated 27 October 1942. <www.qattara.it/55-00%20cristofori.html> (accessed 20 October 2014).

92 Kesselring, *The Memoirs*, p.152.

5

The Tunisian Campaign, 1943

Introduction: a brief outline of the campaign

During the last year of the war in North Africa, a small parachute unit – the 285th *Folgore* Battalion – was reconstituted and attached to the *Trieste* Division as its III Battalion of the 66th Regiment. The unit was formed by the few that had been able to escape at El Alamein; by those that were sick and did not participate in the battle; and by a few reinforcements flown in from Italy. Unlike the other units of the *Trieste*, the troops of the III Battalion were allowed to wear their parachute uniform and badge.

According to *Comando Supremo*, the *Folgore* was to be reconstituted as an elite force for special operations, given the paratroopers' training and fighting spirit, but throughout the campaign, it was once again mostly deployed as a light infantry unit on the Mareth and Enfidaville defensive lines.

The *Folgore* entered the Tunisian campaign with approximately 600 soldiers – articulated on five companies – under the command of Captain Carlo Lombardini, who had previously led the *Folgore's* 20th Company at El Alamein. In January 1943, the battalion had completed its training and was then deployed alongside the *Trieste* Division in defense of the Mareth line. By 1943, the *Trieste* had lost all of its motorized equipment and was, for the most part, a standard light infantry division with two infantry regiments (the 65th and 66th), one artillery group (the 21st), one sapper battalion and an additional small artillery group with 77/28mm guns.

The Tunisian campaign would turn out to be very different from the fighting that the paratroopers experienced in 1942 in Egypt. In Tunisia's mountainous terrain, the armor was much less influential and therefore, the fighting centered less on mechanized and motorized units and more on infantry and artillery. With regards to the Tunisian campaign, Battistelli and Crociani have written: 'Clearly the Italian soldiers, and their units, were not at their best in the offensive, particularly in a highly mobile, mechanized warfare. They were, on the contrary, well suited to fighting a defensive war, in which they actually excelled, particularly when it was fought on much more familiar terrain such as Tunisia'.[1]

In Tunisia, the Italian Army fought a mainly defensive campaign that resembled the fighting experienced by the *fanti* on the Piave River and Mount Grappa in the winter of 1917-18 and the spring of 1918. Its artillery and infantry units – often entrenched in deep weapons pits situated on strategic mountain passes – held their defensive line for several months and proved difficult to overcome by Allied forces with superior weapons.

The Allied armor, for example, was forced by Tunisia's rocky terrain, which hampered all movements, to stay on the main roads – thus offering an easier target for the Axis artillery, while the infantry had to advance against fortified strongpoints. These conditions aided the defensive effort of the Axis forces – and their effectiveness, despite the forces being vastly inferior during the Tunisian campaign, was recognized in Allied post-war accounts. The Americans suffered huge

1 Pier Paolo Battistelli and Piero Crociani, *Italian Soldier in North Africa 1941-43* (Botley: Osprey, 2013), p.56.

losses in both tanks and infantry during the Battle of Kasserine Pass, where Rommel's forces – primarily the 10th, 21st *Panzer* and *Centauro* Divisions, and the 7th *Bersaglieri* Regiment – smashed the enemy lines and pushed the Americans back by 15 miles. Rommel and his men were prevented from achieving a more profound, strategic victory, given the lack of Axis armored reinforcements to consolidate the advance. His tactical victory was, nevertheless, instrumental in disintegrating a number of American infantry units. An American account of the battle states that as a result of the Axis thrust: 'Companies disintegrated into platoons, platoons into squads, squads into solitary foot soldiers chased to the rear by screaming enemies'.[2]

Meanwhile, the British official history of the Tunisian campaign highlighted the defensive capabilities of the Axis forces deployed in rough, mountainous terrain: 'The enemy had always used mortars well but it was in Tunisia that the true damaging effect of the mortar bomb, silent in flight, dropping from above, into well covered positions, lethal in spread, was fully understood'.[3]

For the Italians, in particular, the Tunisian campaign represented the last stand in North Africa, which served a dual purpose: first, both Hitler and Mussolini wanted to maintain a bridgehead in North Africa to stave off the invasion of the Italian homeland by the Allies. To achieve this goal, it was an imperative to ensure that Allied naval, air and military forces were involved in the Tunisian campaign for as long as possible so that they could not be deployed in Europe. Second, the aim was also to secure and consolidate an African bridgehead to use as a jump-off platform, from which to launch a counter-attack in late 1943 to retake Libya – therefore, once Tunisia had been secured, the Axis planned to retake Libya by going into the offensive against the Eighth Army. There was also a third, much more long-term goal, which was to prolong the war and give time to the Axis powers to develop special weapons that could, potentially, turn the tide of the war.

At the beginning of 1943, the situation of the Axis in North Africa was dire. With Operation 'Torch', the American military had entered the North African campaign with full force and with the intent of surrounding Rommel's army – thus, the Allied forces were advancing from the north, while the British Eighth Army was pursuing Rommel's army from the south. On the Mareth line – facing the British Eighth Army – Rommel's forces included four Italian infantry divisions (*La Spezia*, *Pistoia*, *Trieste* and Young Fascists), two armored divisions (15th *Panzer* and *Centauro*), two German infantry divisions (90th Light and 164th) and some sapper and artillery units. In addition, the small *Folgore* Battalion – largely composed of veterans from the great Battle of El Alamein – was also deployed on this line.

In the north of Tunisia, under the command of Colonel General Jurgen von Arnim, the V *Panzerarmee Afrika* (10th *Panzer* Division, 21st *Panzer* Division and *Superga* Division) faced the 2nd American Army Corps and the British 1st Army Corps. Overall, the Axis forces were vastly outnumbered and outgunned. The latter, for example, had approximately 300 German tanks and 40 Italian tanks facing more than 2,000 American and British tanks. Moreover, the Allies had an approximate two to one troop advantage over the Axis. The total number of Axis forces was approximately 218,000 at the beginning of 1943. While Rommel had been able to extricate 78,000 soldiers from El Alamein, Hitler and Mussolini had poured into Tunisia 140,000 fresh troops in less than four months. This force faced the 200,000-troop strong British Eighth Army and the equally strong British First Army and the Second American Army. In terms of armaments, the Allies also held huge advantages in all fields – including artillery field guns and anti-tank guns.

The Italians, in particular, lacked adequate weapons and equipment. The infantry standard anti-tank gun was still, for the most part, the unreliable 47/32mm gun, while Italian M series tanks

2 Rick Atkinson, *An Army At Dawn: The War in North Africa* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), p.372.

3 I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, vol 4* (London: Stationery Office, 1966), p.398.

An Italian artillery position in Tunisia, 1943. By 1943, the Italians could count on more effective anti-tank weapons such as the *Semovente* 75/18mm self-propelled mobile gun, which was introduced specifically for infantry support while fighting enemy armored units. Unfortunately, *Semoventi* were introduced late into the campaign and there were too few of them. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Italian infantry with a *Breda* machine gun strongpoint in Tunisia, 1943. The defensive line is comprised of several zig-zagging machine gun and rifle dugouts. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

could no longer match the larger and heavier British and American units. Their inferior equipment meant that the Italian crews could no longer fight autonomously against Allied amour, such as the Sherman and Grant tanks, and had to rely on German collaboration for the anti-tank defense.

In late 1942, Colonel Arena of the *Ariete* Division had written a post-battle report on the outcome of El Alamein that was centered on comparing Axis and Allied weapons. As far as the Italians were concerned, Arena stated that the Italian military's only chance of fighting effectively against Allied armored units was to deploy an armored mass of *Semoventi* self-propelled units, with 90mm guns alongside artillery batteries of *Flak* 88mm guns; these should completely replace the outdated infantry anti-tank guns. Unfortunately, by early 1943, the Italian Army in North Africa – due to a lack of production output – did not have enough *Semoventi* units to conduct a viable campaign.

Just like the Egyptian/Libyan campaign of 1942, the outcome of the Tunisian campaign was also ultimately determined by logistical factors. In 1943, Malta was no longer under siege by the Axis and its base became once again central in the resupply of Allied troops in North Africa. The latter were resupplied on a regular basis, and all their needs were typically met throughout the campaign; for example, while the Axis were able to ship only 166 new tanks to North Africa in 1943, the Allies were able to ship over 1,000 new units. By 1943, the Allies not only had a greater control of the Mediterranean, but were also in possession of several key ports – including Tobruk. As a result of American involvement in the campaign – and Malta's resurgence – the Axis supply situation became much more precarious *vis-á-vis* 1942. The Axis commanders in North Africa estimated at the beginning of 1943 that they needed 150,000 tons of supplies per month in order to operate. During the campaign, the Italian *Comando Supremo* could only send approximately 80,000 tons per month – a fourth of which was typically lost to Allied submarines and aerial anti-shipping operations. In essence, the Axis had 'no hope of increasing strength in relation to the Allies'.[4] Their campaign was thus doomed from the start because of the great unbalance between the resources available to the Axis forces and those of the Allies. As a result, the Axis armored units (in many instances) had to scrounge for fuel, or its artillery was forced to hold back counter-battery fire during Allied assaults due to a lack of ammunition.

Operation 'Capri'

In January 1943, Rommel's units crossed the border into Tunisia and dug in on the Mareth line – a series of fortified bunkers and trenches. Here, on 6 March, the *Folgore* Battalion took part in a large-scale Axis counter-attack codenamed Operation 'Capri'. With this operation, General Giovanni Messe – who had, by then, taken Rommel's place – intended to delay the British offensive on the Mareth line by attacking first and taking the British infantry off-guard. The overall aim was to surround and destroy British units occupying the vast area between the Mareth line and Medenine with two battle groups. The *Afrika Korps* column – comprised of the 10th, 15th and 21st *Panzer* Divisions; two reconnaissance units; one battalion of the 164th Light Division; the remaining battalion of *Ramcke* Brigade; and artillery unit support – had to assault the main British infantry assembly area between Hir en Nraa and Ksar Rebounten. These positions were held by the 7th Armored Division and the 154th Infantry Brigade, and the 131st Infantry Brigade and the 201st Guards Brigade respectively. It was then to outflank the infantry positions with an enveloping maneuver due north. To the left of the main armored attack, the *Bari* column was to put forth an infantry attack involving three main units: *La Spezia* Division, on the right, was directed against enemy positions on Zemlet el Lebene; the 200 *Panzergrenadier* Regiment was

4 Thomas B. Buell, *The Second World War: Europe and the Mediterranean* (New York: Square One, 2002), p.176.

deployed in the middle; and the *Trieste* Division, on the left, was to advance in the direction of Hir en Nraa. These units were required to assault the strongholds held by the 154th Infantry Brigade.

The operation presented several challenges to the Axis commanders – mainly due to the enemy's superiority in weapons and men. Altogether, the Axis armored units could deploy 131 light and medium tanks with limited fuel availability, 124 field guns, 33 *Flak* 88mm guns, 58 anti-tank guns and low to moderate stocks of ammunition. The British could field 300 tanks, 350 field artillery guns, 460 anti-tank guns and remarkable stocks of artillery shells. In early March 1943, the Allies – still relying heavily on 'Ultra' – had ample forewarning of the Axis' plan to counter-attack, and also knew their order of battle. Consequently, in anticipation of the Axis assault, the British laid more than 70,000 anti-tank mines along the anti-tank defensive ditch to protect their positions from the Axis armor.[5] They also brought up the line a formidable anti-tank gun screen, with more than three-hundred 6 pdr gun units interspersed along the Mareth line.

On 6 March, the Axis forces went into the attack. At 0630, the Axis artillery began to barrage British defensive strongpoints in a bid to weaken the anti-tank screen; then, during mid-morning, the armored units closed in on the British positions, but immediately came under heavy anti-tank gun fire and suffered losses. The 10th *Panzer* Division advanced the furthest, but lost five tanks in the shooting match that ensued with the British anti-tank screen and was forced to retreat – thus, it was clear from the early goings of the engagement that the Axis artillery units had failed to degrade the British screen, and that any potential armored advance would have come at a heavy cost.

Meanwhile, on the left of the Axis deployment, the Italian infantry units assaulted the defensive posts of the 154th Brigade and also suffered many casualties. Some of its units – like the *Folgore* and *La Spezia* – were able to infiltrate themselves and capture a number of British soldiers in their strongholds, but ultimately, as the Axis armor was repelled in a successive offensive attempt during the afternoon, General Messe decided to recall the infantry units and put an end to operations at 2030.

The following are the recollections of a *Folgore* infantryman who took part in the assault:

> We arrived upon the forward British outposts and proceeded to occupy them after having submerged the enemy with hundreds of hand grenades. The counter-attack was supposed to be conducted in close cooperation with a German armored unit, but since the start of the operation there had been no sign of such a unit. The Folgore then resumed its operation by pursuing the enemy with rifle fire and hand grenades. As one company advanced, the other two provided machine gun coverage. One by one the companies took turns in moving against the main enemy position. This was eventually reached and overrun at midday. Our losses were relatively few, while we had captured many prisoners and occupied the main enemy position….
>
> By early evening we reached another enemy position at El Mellah wadi. Here the British put up fierce resistance but in less than an hour the position was overrun and the Folgore fully occupied it…. In the distance we then spotted numerous enemy infantry units and armored formations which appeared ready to counter-attack us, while there was still no sign of the German armor. It appeared clear to us at that point that we had advanced too far into the enemy defenses and that we were totally isolated. As there was still no sign of German units that were supposed to support our assault we decided to pull back…. During the night we were able to fight our way through by avoiding various traps placed in our path by the enemy. By dawn we reached the Axis mainline.[6]

5 Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, *vol 4*, p.325.
6 Doronzo, *Folgore! … E si moriva*, p.166.

Except for a few local successes, as the one outlined above, the Axis counter-offensive of Operation 'Capri' was a dismal failure. The armor had failed to punch a wedge into the enemy's defenses (losing 50 tanks), while the infantry had suffered 635 casualties. This operation was to be Rommel's last battle of the North African campaign. After Rommel departed from Tunisia, he visited both Mussolini and Hitler and argued that the Axis attempt to maintain the Tunisian bridgehead was hopeless, but Rommel was rebuffed and: 'The Axis leaders agreed that Tunisia must be held for strategic reasons; that the Tunisian bridgehead must not be narrowed; and that supplies were all-important'.[7]

The Mareth line

The Mareth line was a 22-mile defensive line stretching from the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea to the Matmata Hills that had been originally developed by the French Army. They had built a number of fortified bunkers and pillboxes, which were then taken over and remodeled by the Axis forces in the winter of 1942-43. The Mareth defensive line – demarcated by the coast and by the Matmata Hills – was the only area of the country which connected Southern to Northern Tunisia through a number of major roads. To the west of the Matmata Hills, it was impossible to reach Northern Tunisia because the land was inhospitable desert, while the opposite end of the line was concluded by the sea. In preparation against the British offensive, the Axis forces had laid 70,000 anti-personnel mines and 100,000 anti-tank mines and barbed wire works that covered more than 19 miles of front line. On the line itself, the Axis had dispersed more than 450 field artillery and anti-tank guns, and its rear was defended by approximately 140 tanks. The defensive line itself consisted of two main sections: the first section – between Mareth and the coast – was heavily fortified with a series of thick bunkers hosting several machine gun nests and anti-tank emplacements, which were connected by deep trenches. The second section – between Mareth and the Matmata Hills – was weaker, since the Axis held the high ground here, and had sited numerous artillery posts controlling the major mountainous passages. From east to west, the Axis defensive line consisted of the Young Fascists Division (holding positions near the coast), the *Trieste* Division (holding positions between Mareth, Arram and Sidi el Guelaa) and the 90th Light Division and the 47 *Panzergrenadier* Regiment (holding the strongholds at Wadi Zeuss and Wadi Zigzaou). *La Spezia* Division and the 164th Light Division held the Hallouf Pass, while the *Pistoia* Division held the westernmost section of the line at Toujane. Each division was organized on two parallel defensive lines: one battalion held the forward outposts, while the remaining two battalions were deployed on the line of resistance.

Montgomery's plan of attack was aimed at breaching the main defenses of the Mareth line at Wadi Zigzaou by concentrating primarily on their northern flank – a sector which was held by the Italian standard infantry units. The main attack – which began at midnight on 20 March – was preceded by a two-hour-long preparatory barrage, which was articulated into two phases: counter-battery fire, followed by a focus on major enemy concentrations. As soon as the artillery preparation had been executed, the infantry – the 7th Battalion of the Green Howards, the 151st Infantry Brigade and 50 Valentine tanks of the 50th Royal Tank Regiment – attacked; however, the infantry operation – which was interested primarily in the positions held by the Young Fascists, *Trieste* Division and the 90th Light Division – did not go as planned, due mainly to the fact that 'the defensive fire was heavy and stiff close-quarter fighting occurred'.[8]

7 Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, vol 4*, p.329.
8 Ibid., p.338.

Italian infantry in Tunisia, spring 1943. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Another photograph of Italian infantry in Tunisia during spring 1943; the unit appears to be well-camouflaged in the more European-like Tunisian territory. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

All that the British soldiers managed to do was create a few small bridgeheads – mainly into the positions held by the Young Fascists and the 90th Light Division. Finally, the armored units of the 50th Royal Tank Regiment were thrown into the battle, but came under heavy gun fire from strategically situated anti-tank guns, which knocked out a total of five tanks.

The following are the recollections of a *Folgore* infantryman:

> The British began their attack on the Mareth Line at 2100 with the same technique used at El Alamein: a frontal barrage with thousands of shells falling on our positions. From 21:00 to 03:00 hours the barrage never relented and we could not even raise our heads above the trenches for fear of getting killed….
>
> As always the Folgore was in the midst of the battle. The British attacked our sector and their main thrust aimed at overrunning the positions held by the companies led by Caroli and Artusi. By my sector, the Battalion's command post, the British infantry attacked us but we repelled it with heavy casualties. Their assault against the two aforementioned companies was much more methodical and was conducted before dawn when it was still dark outside. This resulted in a number of close quarter hand to hand combat clashes. On the right flank, the British attacked and then enveloped the positions held by the 90th Light. They achieved such a penetration in depth that they were then within striking distance of the two Folgore companies. The latter had to counter-attack on numerous occasions in order to clear their positions. Later on my end two tanks managed to overrun at 10:00 hours the anti-tank ditch and then proceeded to fire upon our position. I do not know what would have happened if it was not for the intervention of the last remaining of our anti-tank guns which was able to repel the two tanks. Then in the afternoon British infantry units attacked my position again. We let them get within 100 meters from our position then we opened fire and we killed them all.[9]

By 2000, the Axis infantry had managed to clear several of the British bridgeheads and push back enemy units; the next day – 22 March – the 21st and 15th *Panzer* Divisions vigorously counter-attacked and destroyed a total of 15 Allied tanks.

On the night of 23 March, the British attempted a number of small raids. As part of these operations, a unit of the 51st Division stormed *Trieste* Division outposts at El Harran in an effort to rectify frontline positions. The 109th Company of the *Folgore* Battalion, which was standing in reserve, was called up the line and assigned with retaking possession of the position. The assault unit, led by Lieutenant Lodovico Artusi, proceeded to charge the Scottish troops, despite strong machine gun fire. The enemy positions were stormed – mainly with the support of hand grenades, light machine guns and rifles – while mortar and anti-tank gun units laid the groundwork for the attack with accompanying fire. The paratroop casualties were very severe, and the unit's commander would later die of his injuries, but the 109th was ultimately able to clear the position of enemy forces.

After a week of stiff fighting, the Axis forces were eventually forced to evacuate the Mareth line and retreat after having being completely surrounded by the outflanking maneuver of the New Zealand brigades.

The Battle of Wadi Akarit

After the defenses on the Mareth line in Southern Tunisia were evacuated, the Axis forces managed to escape unscathed by retreating to Wadi Akarit (north of Gabès). This new line was originally

9 Doronzo, *Folgore! … E si moriva*, pp.170-171.

Rommel's first choice of defensive position, given its narrowness (a bare 18 miles' stretch from the coast to Jebel Haidoudi). On 29 March, General Messe communicated to *Comando Supremo* that his troops had successfully retreated and had taken up new defensive positions at Wadi Akarit – thus, the Young Fascists and the 90th Light Division were positioned on Wadi Akarit; the *Trieste* was on the Jebel Roumana Ridge; the *La Spezia* on the towering Fatnassa Ridge; and finally, the *Pistoia* Division was on Haidoudi. The armor – mainly the 15th *Panzer* and the 200 *Panzergrenadier* Regiment – were held in reserve in order to be deployed for counter-attacks. By the start of the battle, the Allies' superiority over the Axis had become overwhelming: 44 battalions against 38 (mostly under-strength) Axis battalions, 400 field artillery pieces against 200 and 462 tanks (mostly Grants and Shermans) versus 56. Moreover, the Allies enjoyed complete control of the sky above Tunisia, since the Western Desert Air Force could count on 21 British and 10 American squadrons, while Axis fighter planes and bombers were too few to have any hope of influencing the coming battle.[10]

Montgomery's plan of attack included a silent night attack by the 4th Indian Division against the *La Spezia's* strongholds on Fatnassa, and a more conventional attack by the 50th and 51st Infantry Divisions against the *Trieste* on Jebel Roumana.

The operation began during the night of 5 April with a massive barrage on the Axis frontline positions. By that time, the Axis forces had been able to only constitute a rudimentary defensive framework: a deep anti-tank ditch had been built, but most of the line was not protected by barbed wire and the anti-tank mines had only been laid on a few key sectors.

While the brunt of the attack was taken by the *La Spezia* Division, the *Trieste* Division faced a combined arms attack comprised by the infantry units of the 51st Division (supported by a squadron of Crusader tanks from the 4th County of London Yeomanry). At 0600, the infantry of the 51st Division had taken the top of Roumana and an hour later, the Crusader tanks had managed to breach two large sectors of the front line on the left flank of the ridge. Meanwhile, the troops of the 154th Scottish Brigade had followed up on the armor and had overrun the main positions of the II/65 *Trieste* – exerting even more pressure upon the Axis' left flank. Despite the collapse of a large sector of the *Trieste* front line – on Post 102, which was located to the immediate right of the breach – the *Folgore* Battalion was able to first contain the enemy blow. Its troops fought off with hand grenades and rifle and machine gun fire numerous attempts by the enemy infantry of the 7th Battalion, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (154th Brigade) to overrun their positions. Its resistance slowed down the enemy advance and allowed the commander of the *Trieste* to take some precautionary measures, which were implemented at 1000 in an attempt to seal the breach. First, both the Young Fascist M and the III/65 *Trieste* Battalions were called up to reinforce the besieged frontline positions. In addition, the *Trieste* commander had also been able to refocus the divisional artillery fire upon the section of the front line that had been breached – thus containing the enemy advance. Once the Highlanders' advance had been halted – primarily by the artillery – the Axis forces counter-attacked. The operation was undertaken by the 200 *Panzergrenadier* Regiment and several units of the *Trieste* Division – including the 108th *Folgore* Company. The counter was able to offset most of the gains obtained by the Highlanders, which were forced to first evacuate the top of Roumana Ridge, and later much of the *Trieste*'s left flank.

The official history of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders recalls the Axis counter-attack:

> At 6 o'clock that evening the most formidable counter-attack of all developed from a force estimated at two battalions with tanks in support. Some of the 7th Black Watch were seen to withdraw, and our A Company, which had gone rather farther than was intended, were

10 Mario Montanari, *Le Operazioni in Africa*, p.459.

> ordered to draw back three hundred yards at dark. This was done successfully, and A Company took up new positions in line with the forward platoon of D Company.…
>
> This was the last German counter-attack, and as dusk came the battle died gradually away, but what a battle while it lasted! It was the most vicious and furious battle that the battalion had yet to endure. The shelling had been intense all day long, and the positions were even stronger than the air photographs showed, and were bristling with guns and weapons of all kinds.[11]

As a result of the sudden and swift counter-attack delivered by the 108th Company against units of the 154th Brigade, its commander – Lieutenant Giampaolo – was later awarded the Silver Medal of Military Honor. The motivation for the recognition was as follows:

> As paratrooper commander led his men into a counterattack against enemy infantry and armored units that had been able to occupy an important position and from which they were threatening to outflank the division. His unit was involved in hand to hand combat that not only inflicted heavy casualties to the enemy, but also led to the capture of several prisoners and the destruction of several armored vehicles.

By the night of 6 April, the frontline positions of the *Trieste* had been secured by the successful Axis counter-attack. Nevertheless, the Axis leadership was forced to evacuate the Wadi Akarit line as a result of the gains made by the 4th Indian Division against the *La Spezia* Division, which was then in a position to outflank the bulk of the Axis defenses.

Although the battle had been lost, the Axis forces fought an effective rearguard operation, which resulted in not only slowing down the enemy advance, but also in inflicting grave casualties; in fact, it is estimated that during the battle, the British suffered 1,289 casualties and 32 tanks were destroyed. The heaviest infantry losses were taken by the Highlanders of the 51st Division.[12]

The Enfidaville line: the Battle of Takrouna

When the Axis forces were driven off the Wadi Akarit, they withdrew to the Enfidaville line. The dictators had ordered their commanders to make their last stand on this defensive barrier and to resist to the bitter end. The Enfidaville line was 20 miles long – mostly consisting of mountainous tracts that ran from Sebkra on the coast to Kralifa; then to Takrouna, Djebel Garci and to Saouaf. From the eastern coast to the west, the Axis forces were deployed as follows: the 90th Light and the Young Fascists Divisions held the battle outposts near the coast; the *Pistoia* and *Trieste* Divisions held the middle ground, with the I Battalion of the 66th *Trieste* Infantry Regiment holding Takrouna, while troops from the *Pistoia* Division held Djebel Garci; finally, the 164th Light Division occupied the strategic mountain passes on Saouaf. The *panzer* units were stationed in the rear and were ready to be deployed in stiffening infantry, or for conducting immediate counter-attacks. On this new defensive line, the Axis forces could count upon 83 German and 177 Italian artillery guns. Each division 'held a half-issue of ammunition each',[13] while the *panzer* divisions were down to less than a few operable tanks. The 15th *Panzer* Division, for example, could only muster four operational tanks for the battle; twenty-one of its units were under repair.

11 Ian Cameron, *History of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, 7th Battalion From El Alamein to Germany* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1946), p.171.

12 William Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1962), p.375.

13 Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, vol 4*, p.403.

The peaks of Djebel Garci (1,000 feet) and Takrouna (650 feet), from which it was possible to overlook vast sectors of the front line, were the dominant features of the new defensive barrier. Their control enabled the Axis forces to not only observe all movements, but also to effectively shell the enemy from key artillery posts.

For General Messe, the Rock of Takrouna – based on its height and its advanced position with respect to the Axis front line – was the main defensive bulwark on Enfidaville:

> When I had inspected our defensive system I had immediately seen the importance which Takrouna Hill could have in the general defensive scheme, though far advanced and almost detached from the main positions. I planned to make it an independent strongpoint whose function would be to break the first impetus of the enemy attack and divert it towards the re-entrants in the coastal and central sectors.[14]

Its defenses were to be centered upon multiple firing points covering its flanks. 'Takrouna', as stated in a directive of the Italian XX Army Corps, 'shall be defended primarily by concealed light automatic gun units blocking its few access points'.[15] According to the New Zealand official history:

> Takrouna was a steep, stony hill with large masses of rocky outcrops. Amidst these were several caves which had been utilized as strongpoints. At the top was the stone village, built out to the edge of the precipice over the greater part of the area. Mines had been laid on and around the hill. It was a truly formidable position, perhaps the most formidable position ever stormed by New Zealand troops.[16]

Takrouna consisted of three main features: the pinnacle, which was its highest point, and it included a domed mosque and an old Berber fortress. Slightly below to the west of the pinnacle, on a continuous elevated ridge, there were a series of buildings and homes, while to the east of the pinnacle – spanning all the way down to the bottom of the hill – there were more homes and buildings which comprised the village of Takrouna. Both flanks were fairly inaccessible, as Takrouna's west side was surrounded by broken country, while the eastern flank was surrounded by vast olive orchards.

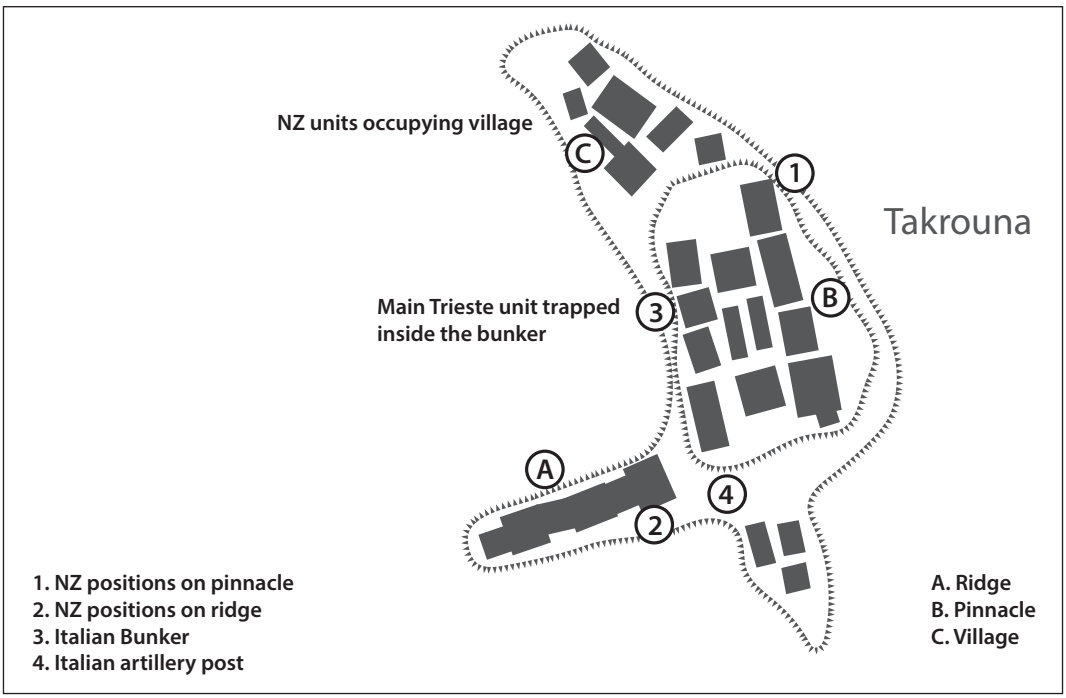
Takrouna's commander, Captain Mario Politi, had organized its defenses with 440 troops – comprising the I Battalion of the 66th *Trieste* Regiment, one artillery group with two 65/17mm guns and a platoon (from 10th Company, 3rd Battalion) of German infantrymen from the 47th Regiment.

The German platoon held the pinnacle, while the *Trieste* units held a number of fortified bunkers and deep weapons pits – protected by screens of barbed wire – along the ridge and throughout the village. Its 2nd Company was deployed on four firing points facing east on the lower slopes of Takrouna. Its objective was to block any enemy advance from behind – and specifically from nearby Djebel Bir Hill. The 1st Company was further up, at about the half-way point on the ridge, with its weapons facing north and west. It was also deployed into four firing points. The 4th Company was on higher ground still, on the slopes that looked to the west and south, while the artillery guns were located on a plateau on the eastern flank. The objective of the defenders

14 Ian McLean Wards, 'Takrouna', *Episodes & Studies, v. 2*, 1951, p.29.

15 Ufficio Storico, Foglio n. 2109/OP: Francesco La Ferla, Comandante Divisione Trieste, 17 April 1943, XX Corpo D'Armata.

16 Thomas Duncan, *New Zealand Medical Services in Middle East and Italy* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1956), p.437.



Map 5.1 The Battle of Takrouna – Takrouna Village and pinnacle, 20-21 April 1943: This map shows the layout of the pinnacle of Takrouna in Tunisia, where the New Zealand forces fought against the paratroopers of the *Folgore* attached to the *Trieste* Division. (Redrawn by George Anderson based upon the following original source: Ian McLean Wards, 'Takrouna', *Episodes & Studies, v. 2*, 1951)

of Takrouna was to hold out for as long as possible to impede the British attack on the main line. They were expected to resist even if completely surrounded by the enemy.

Montgomery's plan of attack envisioned two main operations: with the 5th New Zealand Brigade of Brigadier Kippenberger to take Takrouna, and the 4th Indian Division to seize Djebel Garci. Once the two hinges of the Axis defensive line had been neutralized, Montgomery planned to unleash the tanks of the 7th Armored Division and breach the Axis defenses. This plan would lead to harsh fighting on the Enfidaville line, which for the most part, was conducted on mountainous terrain, where the heavier Allied equipment had to be brought up by porters and pack mules – and where the seizing of key objectives involved heavy artillery preparations, followed up by infantry close-combat operations.

Against Takrouna, the New Zealanders had deployed the 21st Battalion (whose aim was to take the pinnacle and the ridge by attacking from a south-west direction) and the 28th Maori Battalion (who was tasked with first seizing Djebel Bir – a smaller height located slightly behind Takrouna – and then converging on Takrouna from its eastern flank). Each battalion also had under its command one 6 pdr anti-tank unit, one machine gun platoon and three Crusader tanks.

At 2300 on 19 April, the British guns opened fire. It was the start of a prolonged barrage that would last until 0600 on the following day. It first began with a rolling barrage that, after a few hours, turned into a concentrated barrage focused on annihilating the infantry strongpoints. Finally, as the infantry troops moved forward, the artillery shifted its fire to the rear by extending the range of the guns on the Axis secondary lines.

By 0100 on 20 April, *Trieste* infantrymen – manning the most advanced firing points – had already alerted their commanders of the impending enemy attack, as the New Zealanders were spotted in the distance as they slowly made their way toward Takrouna. It was at this point that the Axis guns were dispatched to effectuate the counter-battery fire. This they did with some degree of effectiveness, as the 21st Battalion was the main recipient of heavy Axis shelling. Originally advancing under the cover of darkness, the unit did not suffer any losses; however, when the 21st Battalion approached Takrouna's west flank – exposing itself to machine gun and artillery fire – it began to incur losses: 'At first enemy opposition consisted of artillery and mortar fire, but this was intensified by fire from nebelwerfers, six-barreled electrically fired 15- or 21-cm rocket launchers'.[17]

Despite some heavy casualties during the approach march, by 0600 the 21st Battalion had dug in on Takrouna's west flank. Here, it began a prolonged exchange of fire with a number of *Trieste* Division infantry firing points. From their elevated positions, the Italians put down intense machine gun fire – causing further casualties to the New Zealanders.

The commander of the Italian XX Army Corps would later state that:

> The lay of the land of Takrouna was full of ravines and rocks. It allowed the enemy to infiltrate the ridge from south-west. But once it reached Takrouna it came under the accurate fire of our 4th Company which mowed down several infantrymen, while capturing few others. The Division's chaplain would later recall that he had counted approximately 150 dead enemy soldiers on the slopes of Takrouna.[18]

The failure of the flanking maneuver by the 21st Battalion is also acknowledged in the New Zealand official history of the war: 'So on the west side of Takrouna, although the scene of much courageous fighting, the brigade attack had failed'.[19]

As a result of the heavy losses sustained by the 21st Battalion, Brigadier Kippenberger was forced to withdraw the unit from the battlefield and resort to calling up reinforcements. After his instructions were issued, several units from the 23rd Battalion were, therefore, immediately transported by trucks to the assigned assembly area. Once the infantrymen had dismounted their trucks, they were then ordered to mount an attack – with armored support – against Takrouna's right flank.[20] Accordingly, on Takrouna's east flank, the 23rd Battalion had, by early morning, achieved some degree of success by overrunning a number of enemy infantry firing points – but the unit had also suffered many casualties for only limited gains. In the fight, it had lost two battalion commanding officers; one company had lost all but one of its officers; and overall, the unit had lost 50 soldiers – and 40 severely wounded.

While both the 21st and 23rd Battalions had experienced several difficulties in overcoming the enemy's resistance and were being held up by enemy fire – and ultimately, had been forced to dig in on Takrouna's flanks – a company of the 28th Maori Battalion had been able to advance the furthest in pursuit of the final objective. It had done so with a brilliant outflanking maneuver, which had taken the Axis position on the pinnacle of Takrouna by surprise. The position had, in fact, been outflanked and occupied by the Maoris as a result of a series of concomitant events: first, a German battalion (III of the 47th Infantry Division) had been overrun and, as a result, had evacuated Djebel Bir Hill. As this position fell into enemy hands, the New Zealanders 'were assured a jumping-off place from which to attack the height of Takrouna with an outflanking maneuver

17 William Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.319.

18 Ufficio Storico, XX Corpo d'Armata: Relazione del Generale Taddeo Orlando, Comandante del XX Corpo d'Armata, 'Relazione sui combattimenti per il caposaldo di Takrouna', 24 April 1943, p.2.

19 Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.323.

20 Howard Karl Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p.307.

from the south-east'.[21] Second, as a result of this breach, a small platoon of the 28th Battalion had scaled the ridge and had bayoneted their way through the firing points of the *Trieste's* 2nd Company on Takrouna's flank. The latter had counter-attacked to break off the enemy encirclement, but had ultimately succumbed to the Maoris after violent hand-to-hand combat. Third, the latter had then proceeded to capture Takrouna's pinnacle from behind with a brilliant final maneuver that took the enemy by complete surprise – thus, by early morning on 20 April, this small Maori unit had managed to clear the pinnacle and take control of its main outpost. A short time later, troops of the 23rd and 28th Battalions had been deployed along the base of Takrouna in order to surround and cordon off the area. This siege-like infantry deployment was preventing Axis forces from coming to the aid of the garrison that was still holding out on the ridge. To make matters worse for the Axis, later in the day, a platoon from the 21st Battalion had been dispatched to reinforce the defensive positions on the pinnacle. This unit had also brought up to the pinnacle a number of mortars and machine guns, which were then trained against the major Axis strongholds. Once the New Zealanders had firmly installed themselves on top of the rock, their commander ordered that a large boulder be placed at the mouth of the tunnel that connected the pinnacle to the village; and to further seal the pinnacle's defenses, he also ordered that a number of machine gun units be positioned to protect the flanks and to overlook the village – thus, the swift action of a small party from 28th Maori Battalion had led to a tragic and paradoxical stalemate amongst the two belligerents on Takrouna, since the former had captured the summit, while the Italians still held the fortified bunkers on the ridge and underneath the pinnacle. The Italians' grip on Takrouna had thus become very precarious, since from their privileged position, the New Zealanders began to subject the Italian troops below to constant sniping. Simultaneously, the British artillery also kept the Italian garrison under siege with heavy concentrations of tremendous fire from multiple field guns.

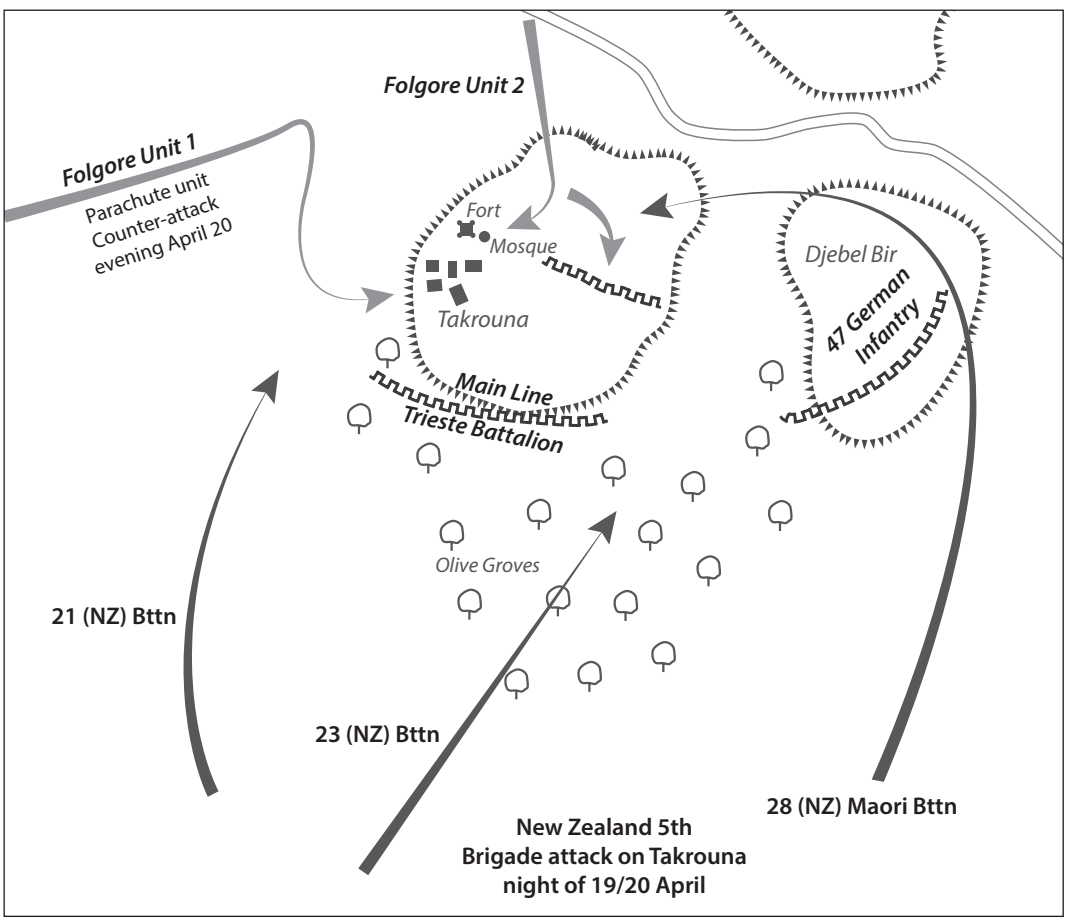
For the *Trieste* units – and for the whole Enfidaville line to survive – the siege of Takrouna had to be broken and its garrison relieved. The latter was still partly on Takrouna, but by the morning of 20 April, it had been completely surrounded and had almost run out of ammunition. In order to highlight its desperate situation, it had radioed the following message: 'We are facing a desperate situation. We have fired our last rounds of ammunition. We have also lost most of our men. The enemy has occupied most positions in and around Takrouna. The enemy is calling up new infantry forces as well as armored units. Once again we face a desperate situation. Please hurry'.[22] Facing such a grave situation – which could have led to the loss of Takrouna – *Trieste*'s commander, General Francesco La Ferla, decided to deploy the *Folgore* Battalion to attempt to oust the New Zealanders from the pinnacle. The paratroop unit mission was twofold: to rescue the infantrymen on Takrouna and to hold it as a strongpoint for as long as possible. This would have allowed to halt, even temporarily, the advance of the British infantry units against the bulk of the I Italian Army.

The relief of Takrouna's garrison was assigned to two *Folgore* units, commanded respectively by Lieutenant Giampaolo (108th Company) and Orciuolo (112th Company). Together, they mustered no more than 180 men, but it was all that was left of the 600 strong battalion that had entered into the Tunisian campaign in January 1943. The plan envisioned a first frontal assault by an 80-troop strong *Granatieri* unit to break the siege and test the enemy's defenses, followed up by the main assault from the paratroops to clear Takrouna.

At 1200 on 20 April, the New Zealanders' fortifications on the Rock of Takrouna were first subjected to a heavy artillery and mortar barrage. This was then followed up by the assault from the *Granatieri* unit at 1400. This unit attempted, in vain, to break the siege around the base of

21 Ufficio Storico, XX Corpo d'Armata: Orlando, p.4.
22 Giovanni Messe, *La mia Armata in Tunisia. Come finì la Guerra in Africa* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1946), p.271.

Takrouna with the aid of machine guns and hand grenades, but it was repelled – with casualties – by intense enemy mortar and small artillery fire. As a result of this failed attempt, the *Folgore* was then swung into action. While the paratroops were converging on Takrouna, their approach march was harassed and disrupted by shell fire, and by the constant bursts of fire from the enemy's machine guns. It was not only hampered by the heavily armed enemy on top of the ridge, but also by well-positioned snipers – and as a result, the paratroops suffered their first casualties; however, once having arrived at the midway point to Takrouna, the paratroopers were fortunate enough to encounter a *Breda* 37 machine gun squad. This unit's commander – one of the remnants of the *Granatieri* force that had previously attacked the rock – was able to provide key intelligence on the enemy's defensive deployment (mainly that the pinnacle was held by two heavily armed infantry platoons, with plenty of machine guns and mortars). Moreover, the commander was able to deduce that the enemy had placed deadly snipers along the ridge and in the village, and that it had also captured the two Italian light artillery units on the eastern slope.



Map 5.2 The Battle of Takrouna – taking the pinnacle, 20-21 April 1943: This map shows the main directions of the attack put forth by the *Folgore* units 1 and 2 to seize the pinnacle that had fallen under the Commonwealth forces' control. (Redrawn by George Anderson based upon the following original source: Author's own sketch)

Folgore soldiers advancing against the enemy during the Battle of Takrouna in Tunisia, spring 1943; note the soldier on the left armed with a *Moschetto Automatico Beretta* M38. This weapon was widely acknowledged to be the most effective light gun of the Italian Army. Unfortunately – up until 1943 – it was produced in small numbers, given Italy's limited industrial base in World War Two; note also how the soldier on the right wears a different helmet – demonstrating that the Italian Army was likely running out of supplies during the tail end of the Tunisian campaign. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Takrouna in Tunisia, 1943; the photo shows the pinnacle, where much of the fighting took place in April 1943. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

After having received this most valuable information, the two paratroop companies were then split up according to the original plan of attack. Lieutenant Andreolli describes in the following terms their simple plan of action: 'We quickly sketched out a pincer tactic, with one company responsible for attacking the fortress on the right, while the other from the left. It was then decided that we would combine forces to overcome enemy resistance on top of the village'.[23] Accordingly, in order to break the enemy siege of Takrouna, the first unit – led by Lieutenant Orciuolo – was tasked with first clearing the village, while the second unit was tasked with reaching and seizing control of the pinnacle.

The fight for the control of the village was very fierce, as close-quarter fighting flared up almost immediately to clear the houses in which the New Zealanders had barricaded themselves into. The battle fractured into a series of small clashes, where the enemy's resistance had to be overcome slowly – house by house and lane by lane. The harshness of the close-quarter fighting can be gleaned from the account furnished by a New Zealand soldier to an American newspaper: 'We literally grappled with them with our hands. I saw one of our men spot an Italian in a little mud-brick house, run inside and kill him with a bayonet and then die when another Italian tossed in a grenade'.[24] Despite the fact that additional Maori units were thrown into the fight to maintain control of the village, the paratroopers continued to hunt down enemy posts and were very meticulous in overcoming all centers of enemy resistance with the use of bayonets, rifles and grenades. By 2000, several New Zealanders' positions on the village had been taken and many prisoners were captured. The paratroopers had also managed to retake possession of the firing points formerly held by the 2nd Company, *Trieste* Division – located on the Takrouna's eastern slope – as well as to recapture the two light artillery guns. In turn, in the harsh fighting, the *Folgore* had suffered 40 casualties.

While fighting had flared up for control of the village, a platoon of 10 parachutists – led by Lieutenant Andreolli – carried out a diversionary assault directed against a few enemy nests. From these firing points situated along the ridge, Maori snipers had troubled *Trieste* infantrymen with their accurate shooting for most of the day.

The following are Lieutenant Andreolli's recollections of the fighting:

> Paratroopers and Maoris came to blows on the ridge. While we were scouring a vast area still controlled by the enemy all of a sudden a group of Maoris came out of a house and an alley manning rifles and bayonets. But we were ready for them and a number of hand grenades were hurled in their direction. The fighting was fierce and I recall a few Maoris even throwing themselves down from the ridge in order to avoid getting killed or captured, while others begged for their life by holding up rosaries or crucifixes.[25]

After having had lost control of the village and numerous firing points on the ridge, the New Zealanders sought the assistance of their artillery and armored units to soften up the Italians on Takrouna. The intent was first to weaken the enemy's hold on the rock and then pave the way for the counter-attack. An armored tank unit was deployed first. This proceeded to surround Takrouna – getting as close to it as possible – and then it began to barrage the Axis strongpoints, but following a 20-minute-long exchange of fire with the Italian artillery, the British armored unit came also under the fire of a German anti-tank squad armed with two *Flak* 88mm guns.

23 Cesare Andreolli, 'Da El Alamein a Takrouna. I paracadutisti italiani nelle tappe della ritirata in Nord Africa 1942-1943', memoriale in possesso dell'Associazione Nazionale Paracadutisti d'Italia sezione di Monza', p.87.
24 'British and Italians Battle to Death on Top Bloody Peak', *The Bend Bulletin*, 24 April 1943, p.1.
25 Andreolli, 'Da El Alamein a Takrouna', pp.88-89.

From a defiladed position, the German guns forced the tanks to disperse; then a fierce artillery battle ensued – aptly described by the *Trieste* Division war diary:

> Our artillery laid down a concentrated fire, and broke up every offensive attempt, dispersing the enemy masses which were attacking in waves. One of the most terrible artillery duels ever registered in North Africa then flared up. The enemy intended literally to submerge under an avalanche of steel and fire the garrison of Takrouna. The struggle reached the pitch of unprecedented violence.[26]

While the artillery battle was raging, the New Zealanders still held firm control of the pinnacle and some additional firing points on the ridge – hence, for the paratroopers, there was only one way to reach their comrades trapped in the bunkers on the half-way point of Takrouna: this meant climbing the north-facing, 50-feet-high canyon that led directly into the pinnacle, since any other way – such as scaling the exposed main path from the village to the pinnacle – was unlikely to succeed. By taking the more conventional path, for example, that led directly into the pinnacle via the main tunnel, the assault party would have come under the direct line of fire of the Maori snipers and machine gunners. The latter would have, most likely, stopped the sally in its tracks. Although full of risks, climbing the steep rock wall offered the only chance to recapture Takrouna; however, for the operation to succeed, the Axis assaulting platoon could only be comprised of experienced mountaineers – therefore, 12 men were chosen based on their prior experience with mountain warfare. The platoon included two infantrymen from the *Trieste* and nine paratroopers – all of which were ex-*alpini* – and a German infantryman, who volunteered for the dangerous undertaking by asserting that he was a Bavarian mountaineer.

In order to facilitate the scaling of the rock, the soldiers were armed with only light weapons, such as hand grenades and pistols; in fact, only three out of the 12 soldiers were also armed with heavier automatic guns. At 2100, under the cover of darkness, the platoon began in a single file to ascend toward the pinnacle – utilizing ropes and bayonets. By slowly and silently pulling its way up the steep cliff, the unit managed (after an hour of rough climbing) to reach the base of the pinnacle. Once they had reached their objective, the members of the assaulting party stopped for a few minutes to catch their breath. They then proceeded to crawl below the main weapons pit, which at the time, was occupied only by a sentry and the crew of a machine gun unit. The position was then overrun by a swift, sudden and deadly sally. With lightning speed, the platoon leapt into the pit and its defenders were quickly dealt with by the explosions caused by several hand grenades.

As the battle commenced, loud thuds from the explosions – combined with almost as noisy bursts of machine gun fire – could be heard down below in the village. This was an indication for the men waiting below that the battle for control of the pinnacle had gotten under way. Now, with the enemy platoons fully preoccupied with repulsing the assault unit, the remaining paratroopers had been given the green light to charge up to the pinnacle through the main path; in fact, while the first assault/climbing platoon had already engaged the enemy on the pinnacle, it was (a while later) joined by another unit, that amidst the chaos caused by the explosions, had managed to scale the main path unencumbered. This attempt by the second unit to reach the pinnacle is also mentioned in the New Zealand official history: 'The Italians made a really determined effort to climb the track but Manahi and Corporal Bell mowed them down with their automatics. The

26 Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.310.

second party forced its way on to the ledge and there was some close-quarter fighting in the alleys between the huts'.[27]

Now that the two platoons had joined hands, the combined force proceeded to storm the mosque and the remaining enemy pits on the pinnacle by lobbing hand grenades and by firing bursts of gun fire into the huts and buildings that the New Zealanders had retreated to. Close-quarter fighting raged for several hours, but by 0200 – when the last pocket of enemy resistance was bayoneted and pushed over the cliff – the assault unit had successfully cleared the mosque and other buildings on the pinnacle. Its capture is also acknowledged by the New Zealand official history: '… but to the consternation of the garrison a shower of grenades from the pinnacle was bursting between the buildings. Every possible approach to the pinnacle was covered and it was quite impossible for the enemy to be there, but the bursting grenades were no figments of the imagination…'[28]

The *Trieste* Division war diary recalled the re-capture of Takrouna by stating that:

> Moving with the vigor characteristic of our best shock troops, Folgore Battalion dislodged the enemy from house after house, pushed him back from rock to rock, hurled him down off the precipices on the eastern side of the mountain, and retook all the lost positions. The mopping-up took many hours, and not until nearly dawn on 21 April could the situation be regarded as completely restored.[29]

While the New Zealand official history of the war summarized the *Folgore* attack on Takrouna as follows:

> On Takrouna itself 14 Platoon of 21 Battalion under Lieutenant Hirst joined 15 Platoon shortly after 9 p.m. on 20 April, and almost immediately afterwards the enemy attacked, achieved a measure of surprise, and succeeded in occupying the mosque and other buildings on the pinnacle, but was stopped from clearing the ledge. The enemy had gained access through the tunnel, which had been overlooked in the course of the various changes of personnel. A period of stalemate followed, for neither side could move the other, but when daylight came on 21 April the enemy if anything had the better of it, as he was on higher ground.[30]

By early dawn on 21 April, the paratroopers had thus regained possession of Takrouna and their effort had also yielded the capture of 150 prisoners (mainly from the 21st and 28th Battalions). During the morning of 21 April – upon learning that the Axis forces had retaken Takrouna – Brigadier Kippenberger dispatched reinforcements from the Maori Battalion to try to dislodge the enemy once again from its peak. Both the pinnacle and the ridge were subjected to very heavy preparatory mortar and artillery fire for most of the morning. One Italian commander recalled that 'there was never a moment that the top of Takrouna was not half-hidden and tracer shells streaking in a slight arc across the valley and ricocheting crazily among the houses'.[31] The New Zealanders even made recourse to a 17 pdr anti-tank gun to soften up the enemy's defenses and to prepare the ground for the infantry attack. Once its firing trajectory had been properly adjusted,

27 Cody Joseph Frederick, *Official History of New Zeeland in the Second World War 1939-45: 28th Maori Battalion* (Wellington, Historical Publications Branch, 1956), p.306.
28 Ibid., p.307.
29 Ufficio Storico, Divisione Trieste: Relazione del Generale Francesco La Ferla, Comandante della Divisione Trieste, 'Il combattimento di Takrouna', 24 April 1943, p.4.
30 Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.336.
31 Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn*, p.492.

'… the gun worked back on to the village from south to north and caused considerable damage with its solid shot, in addition to the alarm caused by its high velocity…'[32]

After the guns had taken their toll for more than four hours of pinpoint shooting on the Takrouna garrison – and destroying much of its defenses – 28th Battalion units then went in for the kill. Their main objective was to assault the fortified bunker near the mosque, where the remaining Axis forces had taken cover during the artillery barrage. The Maoris charged up from the eastern slope – the same way they had come up to Takrouna on the first day of the operation. Their first target was the capture of the artillery post hosting the two 65/17mm guns. The artillery platform was now defended by a platoon of paratroopers deployed on two firing points. Initially, the parachute unit sprang upon the Maoris and stopped them with rifle and machine gun fire, but as the fighting wore on, they were not able to stop the mounting wave of the 28th Battalion's forces and their positions were eventually overrun.

Despite heavy losses, the Maoris continued their assault undeterred. The bunker, which concealed the majority of the Axis forces still on Takrouna, was quickly surrounded and the Maoris began to hurl hundreds of hand grenades against its occupants. The garrison fiercely defended itself and made recourse to multiple counter-attacks in order to clear the position. An attempt was made to relieve the garrison by a platoon of *arditi* that, however, was not able to break the siege around the rock – thus, by late evening (when the ammunition and supplies had almost completely ran out, and with the position totally surrounded by enemy troops), the Axis forces were once again in a very precarious situation.

During the night of 21/22 April, the battle raged on mostly as an artillery duel. The early-morning hours of 22 April saw the defenders of Takrouna still barricaded in the bunker, which had, by then, been turned into rubble. The following is the last message from the Takrouna garrison intended for *Trieste* Division Headquarters:

> 1930 hours on 21 April. We no longer have enough ammunition left. The anti-tank gun unit has just fired the last shell. Enemy tanks have surrounded us and are pressing upon our remaining firing points, raking them from end to end with machine gun fire. Enemy infantry units have also retaken the mosque and have resumed to fire on us from above. We waited in vain for aid and reinforcements, but if they are able to come at all it will probably be too late. The I Battalion of the 66th, the Folgore and Granatieri units will continue to fight until all ammunition runs out.[33]

The message was never delivered and was later found in the pocket of the dispatch runner, Lieutenant Silvestri of the *Folgore*, who had been gunned down while trying to descend Takrouna's northern flank.

A determined charge on 22 April by the Maoris then regained possession of the main bunker and the ridge. Takrouna had been lost forever and its defenders were marched into captivity. The Italian I Army Corps summarized the Battle of Takrouna as follows:

> The counter-attack was launched on the evening of 20 April. The enemy forces were beaten back after heavy fighting for control of each house and alleyway.… By dawn the position had been cleared and our troops were in possession of the pinnacle. The enemy then proceeded to attack in mass forcing our units to consolidate their defenses within the main cavern on Takrouna. The defenders put up a valiant fight and surrendered only when they ran out of

32 Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.338.
33 Salvatore Loi, *Aggredisci e Vincerai. Storia della Divisione Motorizzata Trieste* (Milan: Mursia, 1983), p.92.

> ammunition. For two days the special unit was able to hold the enemy advance and allow our troops to orderly retreat toward the new line of defense.[34]

Axis losses on Takrouna were as follows: the *Folgore* unit was down to 40 men – the majority of which were taken prisoner; the *Trieste* Battalion had suffered two officers dead, six injured and 27 missing; and other ranks: 10 dead, 48 injured and 692 missing. The Germans had suffered three deaths, four injured and 73 missing. Within the 'missing' category, they were either considered to be dead or captured. The New Zealanders captured more than 300 prisoners, as 'eighteen Italian officers, five German other ranks, and 300 Italians were marched away. The enemy were from I Battalion 66 Infantry Regiment, Trieste Division, and from the Folgore Division, two companies of which had reinforced the garrison, and were by general consent the best fighting Italians the Maoris had met'.[35] The New Zealand casualties were as follows: the Maori Battalion suffered 116 casualties; the 21st Battalion 171 casualties; and the 23rd Battalion 116 casualties. In addition, other battalions of the 5th Brigade suffered an additional 56 casualties – a grand total of 459.[36]

The Battle of Takrouna was a fiercely-fought engagement – characterized by numerous instances of hand-to-hand combat. General Horrocks would later state it was the most gallant feat of arms he witnessed during the Second World War.[37] New Zealand's General Freyberg considered it to be a true soldier's battle and 'the hardest operation in the North African campaign',[38] while an officer of the Maori Battalion stated that 'El Alamein was a picnic compared to it'.[39] General Messe would also recall the heroic struggle on the Rock of Takrouna as one of the high points of the Axis war effort in North Africa. It is remarkable to note that such bloody fighting took place less than a month before the I Italian Army surrendered on 13 May – thus putting an end to the Tunisian campaign. Although the New Zealand historical account of the war treats the Battle of Takrouna as a major conquest, it must be remembered that it was a pyrrhic victory. The New Zealand 5th Brigade suffered terrible losses – and as a result, the final assault on the Enfidaville line had to be delayed for several days.

Summing up

The Tunisian campaign is aptly described in the following passage written by a British officer: 'There was an awful feeling of endlessness about the campaign in North Africa. Each battle seemed as if it would be the last and then wasn't. Everything would be concentrated against an enemy defensive position, but no sooner was it taken than another, Hydra-like, took its place a little further on'.[40] For the Axis forces, the Tunisian campaign was a defensive operation which aimed to delay – for as long as possible – the advance of the Allies into Southern Europe. Once a defensive line was compromised, the Axis forces were forced to retreat and fight their rearguard battle against the Allies on a narrower bridgehead. Given their inferior forces, there was never (on the part of the Axis) any possibility of launching a major offensive to increase the size of the

34 Ufficio Storico, Cartella 271: Relazione del Generale Taddeo Orlando, Comandante del XX Corpo d'Armata, 'Rapporto del XX corpo d'armata', 30 April 1943.
35 Cody, *Official History of New Zeeland*, p.308.
36 Ibid., p.308.
37 *The Sunday Times*, London, 3 November 1957.
38 McLean Wards, 'Takrouna', p.28.
39 Ron Palenski, *How We Saw the War: 1939-1945 Through New Zealand Eyes* (Auckland: Hackette NZ, 2009), p.334.
40 Patrick Delaforce, *Monty's Highlanders: 51st Highland Division in the Second World* War (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2007), p.87.

bridgehead – thus, for the small paratrooper battalion (although conducted on more European-like, mountainous terrain), there was never a possibility of being deployed in an airborne operation, or in a surprise raid behind enemy lines. Once again, the battalion was utilized as a standard light infantry unit, while each successive retreat of the campaign was conducted on foot. Similarly, to the German paratroops deployed in Tunisia, the Italian *Folgore* unit was never involved in an offensive airborne operation.

By May 1943, the Axis forces – approximately 200,000 soldiers – surrendered, which put an end to the Tunisian campaign. After the Allies invaded the peninsula, the Italians deposed Mussolini and sued for peace. Once the armistice between Italy and the Allies was signed, the vast majority of the paratroopers and many other units of the Italian Army opted to continue the war with the Germans under the banners of the *Saló* Republic.

The *Folgore* was reformed as a parachute regiment under the command of the *Aeronautica Nazionale Repubblicana*. On 27 May 1944, the unit was deployed to the south of Rome, where it fought against the Allies for several months. It experienced huge losses, and in July, its positions were finally overrun by the Allied advance. Some of its units that were able to escape were then deployed in mop-up operations against partisan gangs working on behalf of the Red International.

6

Conclusion: *Folgore* – An Assessment

The elite units of the Italian Army were, for the most part – with the exception of the naval assault unit the *Decima Flottiglia Mas* (formed during the war, but from units active prior to the war) – constituted either just prior to or during World War Two. This resulted in a series of delays in both their training and deployment, which ultimately undermined their effectiveness during the course of the war. In particular, the delays caused by the military bureaucracy and the conservative thinking of the leaders of the High Command meant that these units could not be deployed during the most opportune first few months of the war, when France was on its knees and the British had been forced to evacuate their forces at Dunkirk in early June 1940. The Parachute Division, in particular, could have possibly taken Malta in the summer of 1940 in a *coup de main*, when its British garrison lacked sufficient personnel and weapons. With an under-strength British garrison at Malta – and with the bulk of the British Army concentrated upon the imminent start of Operation 'Sealion' – the Italian military had a small window of opportunity to implement an immediate airborne and seaborne attack on the island fortress; however, in the summer of 1940, the plans for an attack on Malta had not been drafted and the special seaborne and airborne units were not battle ready. In fact, the *Comando Supermo* – led by Pietro Badoglio – entered the war without a plan for military operations, and it also failed to outline any early strategic objectives (this is despite the fact that Badoglio had been in the position since 1925). Seizing Malta during the first year of the war would have paved the way for a more manageable campaign in North Africa – especially from a supply and troop reinforcement perspective, which were, ultimately, some of the major factors that would undermine Rommel's advance into Egypt in the summer of 1942. If the Italian military had occupied Malta in 1940, it is likely that Rommel's *Panzerarmee Afrika* would have been able to take Alexandria and the Suez Canal.

Another factor that undermined the development of these Special Forces was their inappropriate deployment. This had to do with the Italian military's lack of success during the first year of the war, when the Italian High Command's overriding concern was mainly to prop up frontline defenses. In early 1941, the Italian war effort was faltering in Libya and Greece as a result of stalled offenses and enemy counter-attacks. This led to deploying these Special Forces as ordinary light infantry units rather than in special operations. The special *alpini* battalion *Monte Cervino*, for instance, was deployed in Albania to alleviate a difficult situation, whilst the I Parachute Regiment was tasked with covering the flanks of Graziani's retreating army in Libya. Later on, in 1942, the *Folgore* Division was utilized in the defensive battle of El Alamein, for which – given its preparation and weaponry – it was ill-suited for. In 1943, the *Folgore* Battalion would be used again primarily as a light infantry unit, while various *arditi* and *granatieri* units would also see action (mainly on the Mareth and Enfidaville defensive lines). The overriding concern on the part of the Italian High Command was to throw in these special units for lack of other alternatives, and also in the hope of rectifying its strategic mistakes during the first year of the war. The German High Command would similarly sacrifice the *Ramcke* Parachute Brigade at El Alamein, rather than utilize this unit

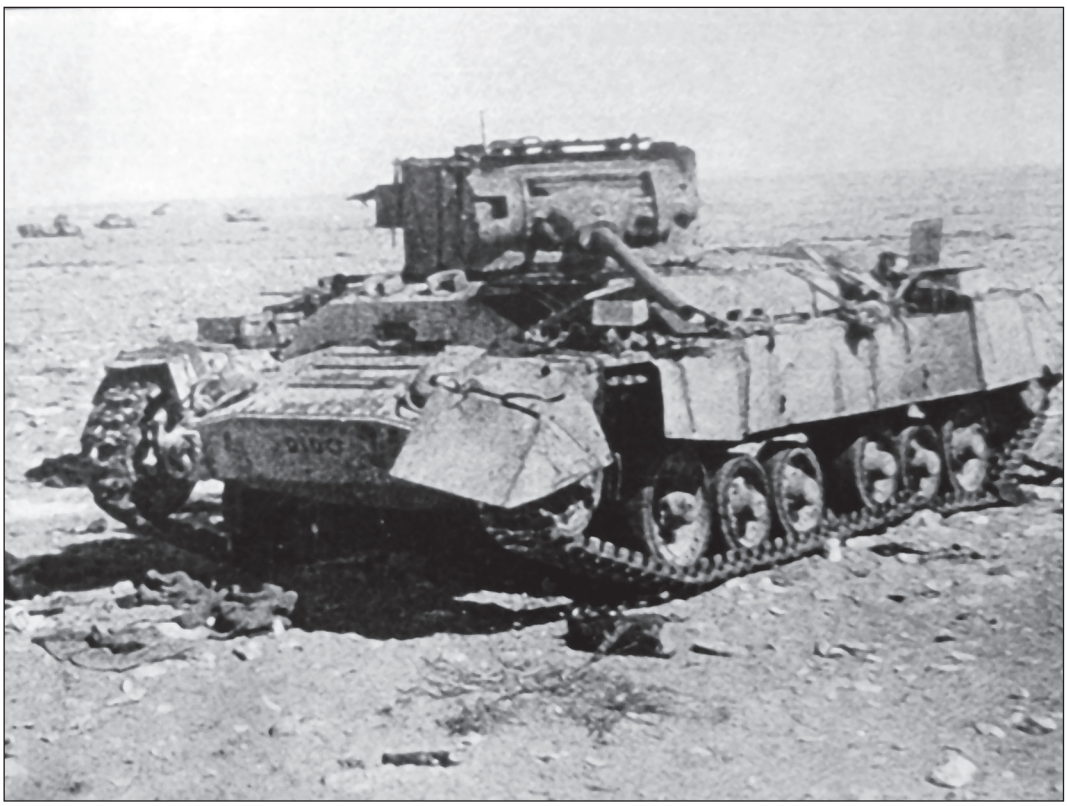
for an airborne operation against the British base of Alexandria, or the Suez Canal. It would also utilize its paratroopers again as light infantry in the defense of Cassino in 1944.

An additional factor that limited the potential of Italy's Special Forces in World War Two – and of the paratroopers in particular – was the lack of proper weapons. As the war wore on, other nations such as Great Britain and Germany developed and introduced into the battlefield more powerful weapons. In contrast, Italy's industrial mobilization for the war lagged behind those of the most powerful belligerents and, as a result, very few new weapons were introduced after 1940. The paratroopers, for example, were armed with anti-tank guns that performed satisfactorily only when facing light British armor. At El Alamein, when the British deployed larger and more durable American and British armor, the *Folgore's* anti-tank gun units proved mostly ineffective. Likewise, the *Beretta* Model 38 sub-machine gun – although an excellent weapon that was also used by the Germans – was not widely distributed amongst the infantry soldiers due mainly to slow production rates by the Italian manufacturer.

A comparison between the *Ramcke* Brigade and the *Folgore*, for instance, is useful for understanding key differences between two very similar units: both units were comprised by hand-picked soldiers that had undergone a similar rigorous training program, but in contrast to the *Ramcke* Brigade, the *Folgore* was mired in equipment problems. While the latter was comprised by anti-tank, small artillery, signals and engineering/demolition companies, the former lacked small artillery companies (with the exception of the anti-tank artillery) and a true engineering/demolition unit. In addition, while the *Ramcke* Brigade was equipped with an adequate number of machine guns and 75mm mountain guns, the *Folgore* units could only count upon their obsolete and inadequate *Breda* machine guns and 47/32mm guns. To further understand differences in firepower, for example, the *Ramcke* Brigade was also furnished with an artillery attachment in the summer of 1942: the 135th *Flak* Regiment, whose artillery was vastly superior to any Italian gun of a similar size. Most importantly, in offensive operations, it was standard practice for the *Ramcke* Brigade to be accompanied by one sapper battalion, various companies of assault engineers and an additional regiment of light artillery. The unit's massive firepower, for example, was one of the reasons why it was able to extricate itself while surrounded in the Fuka pocket in November 1942, as the paratroopers used their *Flak* 88mm and mountain guns to ambush a British motorized convoy and (ultimately) reach the Axis line by using the enemy's vehicles.

Lastly, the timing of the Italian paratroopers' battle-readiness coincided with a phase of the war in which the German High Command had downgraded its parachute units to elite infantry units; in fact, after the invasion of Crete in 1941, the Germans no longer deployed the paras in risky airborne operations with much regularity. Because of the severe losses sustained by the *Fallschirmjäger* in May 1941, the *Führer* did not authorize further major parachute operations. As a result, when the *Folgore* Division was battle ready in mid-1942, it had not only to contend with the continuous dithering on the part of *Comando Supremo* with respect to setting a date for Operation 'Herkules', but it also had to contend with Hitler's general skepticism of airborne operations; then, when the *Panzerarmee Afrika* achieved key victories at Gazala and Tobruk – and Rommel asked for permission to continue the pursuit of the British Eighth Army – the fate of Operation 'Herkules' was permanently sealed. Consequently, the *Folgore* Division would not be utilized for the airborne operation for which it had trained for – thus, as a result of being constituted a year after the Battle of Crete, the *Folgore* Division failed in so far as it was never deployed in the operational role for which it had trained and it had been created for.

While the *Folgore* was never deployed in a major airborne operation, the unit nevertheless showed its worth in Egypt in 1942, and on a smaller scale in Tunisia in 1943. At El Alamein, where the *Folgore* was attacked for several days by British combined arms units, the division was able to repel tanks, armored vehicles and infantry – even though it was lightly armed with small and ineffective anti-tank guns. In this battle, the paratroopers fought a better-equipped enemy



A knocked-out British Valentine tank in North Africa.
(Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

into a stalemate that was ultimately broken – through no fault of their own – by the clash of armor in the northern sector of the El Alamein line.

During the Tunisian campaign, the *Folgore* Battalion would experience very fierce fighting, while often deployed in rearguard operations to preserve the Axis North African bridgehead. It once again showed its worth by breaking the siege and ultimately re-taking Takrouna in a most memorable operation. The action – by a handful of paratroopers and infantrymen from the *Trieste* Division, which first climbed and then seized the pinnacle of Takrouna – showed how effectively the elite units could fight. Similarly, to the German *Fallschirmjäger* or the British commando units, the real value of the Italian paratroopers was in their training, their *esprit de corps* and their strong motivations. These factors made the paratroopers first-rate combatants that could be deployed in a host of fighting conditions. Operations 'Beresford' and 'Braganza', the Battle of El Alamein and the Tunisian campaign showed how difficult it was for their opponents to break down and overcome defensive positions held by parachute units. The paratrooper units, even if deployed in a defensive battle, were a really hard nut to crack.

Appendix I

Orders of Battle

Italian X Army Corps, 23 October 1942 (General Enrico Frattini)

17th *Pavia* Division (General Nazzareno Scattaglia):
-27th Infantry Regiment (two battalions)
-28th Infantry Regiment (two battalions)
-26th Artillery Regiment (three units)
-18th Sapper Battalion

27th *Brescia* Division (General Brunetto Brunetti):
-19th Infantry Regiment (two battalions)
-20th Infantry Regiment (two battalions)
-1st Artillery Regiment (two units)
-17th Sapper Battalion

185th *Folgore* Division (General Enrico Frattini):
-186th Parachute Regiment (three battalions)
-187th Parachute Regiment (three battalions)
-185th Parachute Artillery Regiment (two units of 47/32mm guns)
-8th Sapper Battalion

Support units:
-9th *Bersaglieri* Regiment (two battalions)
-16th Artillery Group (105/20mm guns)
-8th Artillery Group (149/28mm guns)
-31st Sapper Battalion
-10th Sapper Battalion
-10th Battalion (communications)

***Folgore* Division, 23 October 1942**

Deir el Munassib sector: 187th Regiment (*Tenente Colonnello interinale* Alberto Bechi Luserna)

II Battalion – Major Mario Zanninovich
-4th Company
-5th Company

IV Battalion – Major Vincenzo Padella
-10th Company
-11th Company
-12th Company

IX Battalion – Captain Pasquale Chieppa
-25th Company
-26th Company
-27th Company

185th Regiment artillery battery groups
-3rd Company
-5th Company
-6th Company

Artillery company of the 187th Regiment

Sapper unit

Communications unit

Post 105 sector: *Raggruppamento Ruspoli* (*Tenente Colonnello* Carlo Ruspoli)

VIII Sapper Battalion – Major Giulio Burzi
-22nd Company
-24th Company

VII Battalion – Captain Carlo Mautino
-19th Company
-20th Company
-21st Company
-6th Company (on loan from II Battalion)

185th Regiment artillery battery groups
-1st Company
-2nd Company

Artillery company of the 186th Regiment (two platoons)

Mortar company (two platoons)

Sapper unit

Communications unit

Naqb Rala sector: 186th Regiment (*Colonnello* Pietro Tantillo)

VI Battalion – Major Giovanni Bergonzi
-16th Company
-17th Company
-18th Company

V Battalion – Lieutenant Colonel Giuseppe Izzo
-13th Company
-14th Company
-15th Company

185th Regiment artillery battery groups
-4th Company

Artillery company of the 186th Regiment (two platoons)

Mortar company (two platoons)

Sapper unit

Communications unit

***Trieste* Division, March 1943 (General Francesco La Ferla)**

65th Regiment
I Battalion (attachments from *Trieste* Division of 1942)
II Battalion (attachments from *Bologna* Division)
III Battalion (attachments from *Trento* Division)

66th Regiment
I Battalion (attachments from *Trieste* Division of 1942)
II Battalion (attachments from IV *Granatieri*)
III Battalion (attachments from *Folgore* Division)
-107th Company (Captain Riccardo Caroli)
-108th Company (Lieutenant Rolando Giampaolo)
-109th Company (Lieutenant Ludovico Artusi)
-110th Company (Lieutenant Vittorio Raffaelli)
-111th Company (Lieutenant Federico Bosco Corradini)

21st Artillery Regiment
I Group – 100/27mm guns
II Group – 75/27mm guns
III Group – 75/27mm guns
IV Group – 105/28mm guns

Appendix II

List of Gold Medal for Military Valor Recipients

The Battle of El Alamein: *Folgore* Division

Lieutenant Ferruccio Brandi, 187th Regiment

As the leader of a small paratrooper unit – under attack by much greater armored forces – he urged his troops, with his example and resoluteness, to defend at any cost the forward position that he had been entrusted with. As the position was overrun by enemy armored units, he rounded up its few survivors and led them in a furious counter-attack that managed to push back the enemy infantry advancing behind the tanks. When his firing point was attacked once again by tanks, he and his troops were able to repel them for a second time. When all anti-tank gun shells had been exhausted, he attacked an enemy armored vehicle with an incendiary device – engulfing it in flames.

While fighting in the trenches, he was hit in the jaw by machine gun fire – and despite the pain (and the fact that the bullets had transfigured his face) – he continued to lead and encourage his unit to fight on. Thanks to his fighting spirit, the unit was able to maintain possession of the forward position for longer than was humanly possible.

Captured: 24 October 1942; died: Bolzano, 2014.

Lieutenant Ferruccio Brandi, 187th Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Lieutenant Marco Gola, 186th Regiment

He began his career as an artillery officer, with great professional and moral qualities, and then volunteered to become a paratrooper. Rushed to a hospital for the treatment of an illness contracted due to the hardships of the desert, he fled the medical facility in order to participate in the great battle. During the battle, he stood tall and firm – while rabid enemy fire was whizzing all around – to effectively direct the mortar units under his command. During a very violent infantry and armored attack against both flanks of his position – and that had been preceded by a long and intense preparation of artillery fire – he continued to incite the crews of his mortar units to hit back at the enemy.

As the paratroopers later counter-attacked, he directed his men to leave their mortar emplacement in order to participate in the counter-thrust. After having gathered his men, he led them to the counter-attack that resulted in disorienting and pushing back the enemy troops. Injured twice, he continued to fight; injured for a third time, he refused medical treatment and instead kept on urging his men to fight on. Knowing full well that he was going to die, he remained calm and collected, and stated to his men that he was proud of how the battalion had fought. He died a few hours later – putting an end to a glorious, yet generous, existence.

Died: Naqb Rala (El Alamein), 24 October 1942.

Lieutenant Marco Gola, 186th Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Lieutenant Giovanni Gambaudo, 186th Regiment

As the commander of a forward positioned firing point that was attacked by overwhelming armored and motorized forces throughout the night, he continued to fight off the enemy – thus wearing down his offensive momentum, while also causing substantial enemy losses. At dawn, after having been badly injured, he led a fierce counter-assault to ease the enemy pressure on the nearby firing points with the few men that were still combat able.

Driven back into his firing point by heavy enemy artillery fire, which wounded or killed almost all of his men, he continued to oppose the enemy advance with the few weapons still available. After being wounded two more times, he was still unwilling to surrender and continued to fire his musket in an upright position, despite strong enemy fire. While still fighting with his rifle, he was hit by a fourth bullet. Refusing to surrender, he died in his firing point while shouting out: "*Folgore* dies, but does not surrender! *Viva l'Italia*!"

Died: Qaret el Himeimat, 24 October 1942.

[Author's note: I have no photograph available of Lieutenant Giovanni Gambaudo, 186th Regiment.]

Sergeant Major Dario Pirlone, 185th Artillery Regiment
As the commander of an anti-tank unit, he was engaged against a powerful enemy force comprised of tanks and infantry. After much heavy fighting – in which his unit managed to inflict serious casualties upon the enemy – he was able, with a bold move, to capture an enemy tank crew. Shortly thereafter, his anti-tank emplacement was bombed by enemy fire that destroyed the gun, injured many crew members and injured the sergeant as well. Despite the injury, he urged his men to keep fighting. When his position was overrun by overwhelming enemy forces, he led his men in the fight with hand grenades and daggers.

Despite the pain caused by the serious injury to his legs, he continued to discharge his gun against the enemy, while shouting: "You will not have me alive – *Viva l'Italia*!" Shortly thereafter, he bravely fell to his death.

Died: El Alamein, 24 October 1942.

Sergeant Major Dario Pirlone, 185th Artillery Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Lieutenant Roberto Bandini, 186th Regiment
As the commander of a firing point that was attacked by a much larger enemy force – and supported by armored units – he was able to lead his men in first halting the enemy attack, and then in a bold counter-attack that broke the enemy's offensive thrust. When the enemy attacked again, he continued to lead his men in order to relieve the position from the pressure of the assault. As the post was attacked once again, he led its resistance with a violent counter-attack. Wounded very seriously for a second time, he persisted in fighting in this unequal struggle, while fueling the fighting spirit of his brave paratroopers with his heroic example. Injured for the third time, he valiantly fell to his death after three days of fighting in defense of his firing point.

Such a great inspirational figure of legendary heroism ended his short existence while shouting: "Forward into battle, *Folgore. Viva l'Italia*!"

Died: Post 125 (Qaret el Himeimat), 25 October 1942.

Lieutenant Roberto Bandini, 186th Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Soldier Giuseppe Cappelletto, 186th Regiment

As the dispatch runner of a forward position that was attacked by a large deployment of enemy armored units, he kept on running forward throughout the fighting in order to provide reliable information to his commader. Although wounded a first time, he kept on running to numerous firing points – and was also able to carry on his back a comrade that had been wounded more severely than him to the rear. After receiving medical treatment, he refused to abandon his comrades in order to continue the fight.

After his firing point had been surrounded by enemy troops, he volunteered to report back the development to his commander by crossing a dangerous uncovered area bristling with enemy fire. Injured a second time during this latest mission, he nevertheless returned to the firing point. By then, the latter had been completely encircled by vastly superior enemy forces, but the soldier continued to fight alongside the few survivors, while all the officers had already fallen. Refusing to surrender, he was ultimately struck by the explosion of a hand grenade and fell to a heroic death.

Died: Post 125 (Qaret el Himeimat), 25 October 1942.

Soldier Giuseppe Cappelletto, 186th Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Soldier Gerardo Lustrissimi, 186th Regiment

Assigned to defend a heavily targeted minefield gap, he fought all night with his flamethrower to fend off the encroachments of several enemy armored units. When he had ran out of liquid, he jettisoned his weapon and continued to fight by launching explosive devices against the enemy until he was wounded and captured, but as soon as he had recovered from the injury – along with a few comrades – he was able to break free from his captors and return to the front line. Here, he resumed his combat role – persisting to fight in a most unequal struggle.

After having run out of ammunition – and while the tanks were in the process of overrunning the gap – he unearthed a landmine and threw it at the first tank leading the enemy unit. While the tank was damaged by the explosion, he was also engulfed by the flames and hit by shrapnel – encountering a glorious death: a shining example of supreme heroism and of great warrior-like virtues.

Died: El Alamein, 25 October 1942.

Soldier Gerardo Lustrissimi, 186th Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Sergeant Nicola Pistillo, 186th Regiment

During the course of a particularly bitter and heavily fought battle, he was put in charge of defending a forward positioned firing point that was attacked several times during a 24-hour period. Even though his position was threatened several times by the enemy, he and his men were able to fend off all attacks. Recognizing that the enemy had broken through with infantry and tanks at a firing point nearby, he led a small unit – with hand grenades and other explosive devices – to break off the encirclement, and to finally enter into the trenches. Here, after having discovered that the unit's commander had died, he gathered the few that were still able to fight and led them into a counter-attack that resulted in halting the enemy's offensive thrust.

After having been injured for a second time – and facing yet another enemy assault – he refused to surrender and led his men once again to the counter-attack. Shouting: "The *Folgore* dies, but does not surrender!" he died at the head of his men – and while still in the firing point that he had so fiercely defended: a hero and a great commander, and a true leader of soldiers.

Captured: El Alamein, 25 October 1942; died Italy, 1983.

Sergeant Nicola Pistillo, 186th Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Corporal Dario Ponzecchi, 185th Artillery Regiment

Assigned as a sentry – with the responsibility of monitoring enemy attempts aimed at the decommissioning of the minefield – he intervened during the night after having heard noises in the distance. While in the minefield, he was ambushed by an enemy unit, but had no hesitation to call on his comrades – urging them to open up with machine gun fire.

While the guns were able to kill the opponents, they also took his life: another great example of somebody sacrificing his young life for a greater cause – animated by a high sense of duty and by stoic firmness.

Died: El Alamein, 26 October 1942.

Corporal Dario Ponzecchi, 185th Artillery Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Captain Constantino Ruspoli, 187th Regiment

As the commander of a paratrooper unit – deployed as a standard infantry unit in defense of an isolated post in the desert – he first withstood a fierce barrage and then an attack by overwhelming enemy armored forces. After halting the attack in its tracks, he led his men in a counter-attack with indomitable courage. After the enemy was caught completely by surprise by the fierce counter-attack, its units began to pull back. It was during the latter stages of the counter-attack that the commander of the vastly depleted company fell to his death after being shot in the chest by a burst of machine gun fire.

Just before dying, he still had the strength to urge his men on and to shout: "*Viva l'Italia*!" A fierce commander and an exemplary soldier, he contributed in shaping the *Folgore* Division's legendary aura of glory.

Died: Deir el Munassib, 26 October 1942.

Captain Constantino Ruspoli, 187th Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Captain Gastone Simoni, 187th Regiment

Originally a volunteer of the parachute unit, he concealed a prior war injury in order not to be transferred away from his men during the great battle. As the company's commander, he led it with indomitable firmness for several days against successive infantry attacks, supported by both artillery and aerial bombardments. Faced with an enemy envelopment, he led his men in a quick counter-attack that achieved the goal of forcing the enemy to retreat after being subjected to a barrage of hand grenades and other incendiary devices.

While chasing the enemy beyond the perimeter of his position, he fell mortally wounded to his death: another great example of dedication to the cause.

Died: El Alamein, 26 October 1942.

Captain Gastone Simoni, 187th Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Soldier Giacomo Cesaroni, 187th Regiment

As the company's dispatch runner, he kept communication flowing between the command post and the unit's numerous firing points throughout a prolonged enemy preparation fire; then, during the infantry attack – and even though he had been wounded and was dripping with blood – he continued to lead extremely dangerous missions.

After being injured again, he refused medical help and volunteered to deliver an important dispatch to the commander of the battalion. While in the process of delivering the message, he was wounded for a third time as he crossed an area swept by gunfire. Shot in the limbs, he was not able to walk, but still managed to deliver the message by crawling on the ground. Finally, when he felt that he was about to die, he stated that he was glad that he had offered his life to his country, but that he was also sorry that he could no longer serve it.

Died: Deir el Munassib, 29 October 1942.

Soldier Giacomo Cesaroni, 187th Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Soldier Leandro Franchi, 186th Regiment

Franchi – a war volunteer – was involved in many high-risk operations, in which he always led by example. During a fierce enemy attack – carried out mainly by several armored vehicles – his unit was overwhelmed and the enemy captured him after having sustained several wounds. Despite these injuries, he attacked the sentries and engaged them in a wild fight, which ultimately led to him returning to the front line (along with several comrades). During his trip back to the trenches, he was also able to carry – on his back – a wounded officer, as well as lead to safety another soldier that had been blinded by a grenade.

Shortly thereafter, he was captured for a second time after sustaining heavy fighting. Once again – while in enemy custody – he attempted, albeit injured, to flee by taking the loaded pistol from a dead soldier and engaging the sentries in hand-to-hand combat. He managed to return to his unit, but by then, he was in a terrible shape, with his right limb severely injured and the loss of vision due to an injury to his eyes. A few moments later, he collapsed and died. Franchi was a noble example of great altruism and individual achievement.

Died: El Alamein, November 1942.

Soldier Leandro Franchi, 186th Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Lieutenant Giovanni Starace, *Folgore* Division

A paratrooper trainee full of vibrant enthusiasm and faith, he lost his arm and severely injured his shoulder during training, but insisted on sharing the same dangers and burdens of his comrades – ultimately receiving his parachute license. When the paratroopers were dispatched to North Africa, he opted to follow them, despite being a disabled war veteran. At the front, he carried out several important – and dangerous – missions and tasks with tremendous skill, courage and with a deep sense of duty.

During a very critical moment in the battle, when the division had been encircled by overwhelming enemy forces, he put forth a superhuman effort for several days and nights. Despite obstacles and hardships of all kinds, he safeguarded important materiel that he had been charged with securing. During a very intense enemy bombardment, he refused to seek cover in the shelter and instead, went into no man's land to aid an injured comrade; he eventually managed to bring him to safety by pulling him with one arm. While bringing the soldier to safety, he was hit by a bullet and sustained injuries to his head. After being brought to a small field hospital for treatment, he returned to his unit.

Died: Unknown.

Lieutenant Giovanni Starace, *Folgore* Division. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Corporal Antonio Andriolo, 186th Regiment

As the commander of an 81mm mortar unit in charge of guarding a minefield gap during a very hard-fought battle, he held high the morale of his troops with his example – and for eight days, repelled repeated enemy efforts to penetrate the gap.

Wounded during the course of the battle, he refused medical treatment and instead, chose to remain in his place. After the enemy had broken through and the paratroopers were retreating on foot – and after his unit had been urged to surrender – he instead implored it to fight on. As a result, the unit's mortars were deployed to repel several armored units that had attempted to surround the paratroopers. As the mortar fire caused the enemy to respond with heavy artillery fire, the commander urged his men to resist at all costs by standing in an upright position in full view of the enemy fire. As he was directing mortar fire, he was struck by a hand grenade; as his soldiers rushed to help him, he continued to direct fire by urging the men to shoot until he died.

Died: Hill 146 (Rain Pool), 4 November 1942.

Corporal Antonio Andriolo, 186th Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Lieutenant Colonel Carlo Ruspoli, 186th Regiment
As a paratrooper commander that had been wounded twice while crossing the minefield – and that was also tormented by illness – he chose to remain on the front line, alongside his brave soldiers, when the enemy finally struck. Attacked by superior armored forces, he was always there on the front line while the fighting raged on.

Calm and impassive under the heavy artillery bombardment, he not only set an example for his troops, but he was also a core element of the defensive effort. He was eventually shot dead by a bullet that ended the heroic existence of this fearless soldier and fierce commander, who was totally dedicated to the greatness of the fatherland**.**

Died: Camel Pass (Qattara Depression), 24 October 1942.

Lieutenant Colonel Carlo Ruspoli, 186th Regiment. (Ufficio Storico – official archive, Italian military, Rome)

Other Gold Medals for Military Valor: *Folgore* Division, North Africa

Sergeant Major Mario Giaretto, 186th Regiment; 8 August 1942.
Second Lieutenant Omero Lucchi, 185th Regiment; 31 August-4 September 1942.
Sapper Clinio Misserville, 185th Assault Sapper Company; 10 September 1942.
Major Aurelio Rossi, 187th Regiment; 20 August-3 September 1942.
Captain Fabio Rugiadi, 187th Regiment; 30 August 1942.
Second Lieutenant Giovanni Stassi, 186th Regiment; 25 August-2 September 1942.

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